

Making a Difference: The Art of Community Connecting

“There is no being or becoming without relationship. From the beginning, we grow to sense the need and importance of relatedness. At birth in total helplessness, we engage in our first coupling, mother-child, and from that time on, the more sophisticated our lives become, the more interrelated we become. In a sense, we spend our entire existence weaving one relationship into another until we’ve created, like the web of a spider, a complete pattern.”

-Leo Buscaglia

Introduction

When asked, “What are the most important things for staff to spend their time on?” individuals with disabilities said (Amado, 1993):

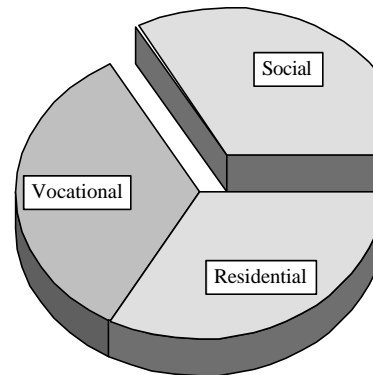
- 👍 To help us make more friends, especially friends who are not disabled
- 👍 To help us get along better with people

After reading this study, I asked myself, “What do we, as service providers, spend most of our time on?” The answer that came was threefold: doing paperwork, doing things for people, and teaching people how to do what I call “functional” skills. These functional skills include preparing a meal, riding the bus, doing laundry, going to the bank and a variety of other daily living skills- all of which are important and necessary. However, it hit me hard when I thought about what individuals with disabilities said- “To have more friends and get along better with people.” It continued to ring in my mind . “To have more friends and get along better with people. To have more friends and get along better with people...” It reminded me of a story:

*There once was a rabbit who was foraging in a garden when suddenly a dog appeared around the corner and gave chase. The rabbit was a fast one and easily out maneuvered the dog. The dog, however, was persistent and continued chasing the elusive rabbit. Soon a crowd began to gather watching the scene unfold. The crowd cheered the rabbit telling him, “Keep up the good work. He won’t catch you. You are too quick for him.” The saga continued and soon the rabbit began to tire. “Keep on going rabbit. Hang in there. We believe in you,” they continued to cheer. Someone from the crowd threw the rabbit a carrot. “Here, this will give you some energy.” The rabbit gobbled it down, and continued running around the yard with the dog still hot on his trail. The crowd continued to cheer, shouting their encouragement. However, the next time the rabbit ran past the crowd, he stopped briefly, and said to them. “I appreciate all your encouragement and belief in me. I also appreciate the carrot, but will somebody **please** do something about the dog.”*

I think we are doing a lot of encouraging and throwing a few carrots, but just like the crowd overlooked what the rabbit really needed and wanted, I believe we are overlooking a few things as well- “To have more friends and get along better with people.”

The service system has come a long way over the last thirty years and it is an exciting time to work in this field. Great strides have been made in residential and vocational opportunities for people with disabilities. Attitudes and stereotypes are changing. Our work, however, is not yet finished because there is still one piece missing. People with disabilities may be geographically integrated into our community, but they are still socially isolated.



Perspectives on Community Connecting

Pro- Social Skills Perspective

There are several perspectives people hold, sometimes unconsciously, which affect the art of community connecting. The first of which is the Pro-Social Skills Perspective. This position says to us that a person with a disability needs to be “fixed.” A certain level of social appropriateness must be reached before we should support someone in developing relationships with members of the community. To this end, we develop social skills curriculums, assessments of social appropriateness, and hire behavior specialists to help us alter someone’s behavior. We do all these things to get a person ready for successful community integration.

Unfortunately, that day of readiness never comes. They never reach that arbitrary level of appropriateness that we set for them. They continue to live in isolation. This perspective is insidious. We have good intentions. We want to help people. Social skills curriculums, assessments, and behavior specialists are not necessarily bad. They are tools that can be positive, but they often become barriers, blinders, and chains. Just as a person cannot learn to swim without getting in the water, a person who has challenging behaviors cannot learn positive social behaviors without getting their feet wet as well.

Socio-Cultural Perspective

A second perspective is the Socio-Cultural Perspective. This position says that we have to “fix” society so it will be more accepting of people with disabilities. We need to protect them, make sure it is safe, and safeguard against rejection. On the surface it is easy to agree with this perspective. I do not want people to be rejected and want to make sure they are safe. However, as with the first perspective, this one is also insidious in its ability to keep people isolated. Sure, we need and must minimize risk of danger, but in doing this to such an extreme, we also

minimize a person's life. People with disabilities are insurance rich, but life poor. This is much like the person who bought fire insurance, life insurance, flood insurance, tornado insurance, meteor shower insurance, and monsoon insurance until he virtually had no money left to enjoy life. Rejection, pain, and sadness are part of life just as happiness, love, and joy. People with disabilities have a right to it all. If we think we are protecting people with disabilities against pain, rejection, and sadness as things stand now, we are deceiving ourselves. These things are part of the human condition, and I would argue there is more pain, sadness, and rejection when people are isolated.

Robert Redford Perspective

A third Perspective is one that can assist someone the most on the journey of community connecting. I call this the "Robert Redford" perspective. I call it this because it reminds me of a movie called the "Horse Whisperer" which Robert Redford starred in and also directed. The character Robert Redford plays is a man who works with and trains horses. At one point someone says to him, "I hear you help people with horse problems." Robert Redford's response epitomizes the essence of this perspective. He replies, "No, I help horses with people problems." The same thing can be applied to community connecting. "I hear you help staff with behavior problems." "No, I help people who are labeled with staff problems." In short, the Robert Redford Perspective says, "Come as you are and we will deal with it while on the journey of community connecting." Begin wherever the person is and start today.

Why Work on Community Connecting?

Benefits of Friendships

When I speak to different groups I always ask, "Why spend all this time on community connecting? What are the benefits of relationships and friendships?" The answers are primarily broken down into two main areas: emotional and practical benefits. This discussion always seems to generate a great deal of participation. I usually make a list on an easel board of the responses generated, and they often include:

Love	Companionship	Sense of value
Self-Esteem	Sense of belonging	Respect
Trust	Fun	Someone to talk to
Hang out	Hope	Freedom to be yourself
Encouragement	Pat on the back	Sharing secrets
Sounding board	Helps move	Ride to work
Babysit kids	Home repair	Watch football

The list goes on as we talk about the benefits of friendships and relationships. A great philosopher summed it up best, however. You may have heard of him- Rocky Balboa. He was the boxer played by Sylvester Stallone in the movie, *Rocky*. Many people do not realize this, but

Mr. Balboa is an expert in community connecting. In one scene, Rocky is jogging in downtown Philadelphia and he is stopped by Paulie. Rocky is dating Adrian, who happens to be Paulie's sister. Now Adrian, at first glance, is homely looking, backward, and does not appear to be much of a catch. When Paulie stops him, he asks, "Yo, Rock, what do you see in my sister. There ain't much there? Why you datin' her?" Rocky, ever so eloquently, replies, "Adrian got gaps." "Adrian got gaps?" Paulie responds. "What do you mean, Adrian got gaps?" "Well, uh, you know," says Rocky. "Adrian got gaps. I's got gaps. Together we don't got no gaps."

In the simplest form, relationships in our lives fill our gaps. Alone we have many problems and holes, but together we are more complete. I know I have plenty of gaps. How about you?

One parent of a child with a disability said, "It is friendship that will ultimately mean life or death for our daughter. It is her and our only hope for a desirable future and protection from victimization."

Let's Play a Little Poker

Jack Canfield, the editor of the Chicken Soup for the Soul books, describes what he calls the "Poker Chip Theory of Self-Esteem." Imagine a game of poker where one person has twenty-five chips, one person has ten chips, and another person has one chip. In this game, which person is more likely to risk more, bet more freely, and enjoy himself? Obviously, it is the person with the twenty-five chips. Why? It is because he can afford to take more risks and lose more chips while still remaining in the game. What about the person with one chip? He is more likely to guard his chip, not risk it, be more anxious about betting, and less likely to enjoy himself. This is analogous to life. People with more "chips" will take more risks, try new things, and participate more in life. People with fewer "chips" will take fewer risks, and not live life to the fullest. Often, people with disabilities do not have many chips. Community connecting and developing relationships can increase their stack of chips.

A Bird's Eye View

If we took a bird's eye view and could look down on the lives of people with disabilities in your community, the connections to neighbors, friends, associations, community groups, local businesses, and churches would most likely be very small. People with disabilities often do not have friends or relationships outside of people who are paid to be with them and other people with disabilities. They often do not see or spend time with friends or people of their choosing

and must rely on staff to assist them in maintaining contact with any friends they do have. I have read all kinds of statistics on the lack of friendships and relationships of people with disabilities. While statistics are interesting, it is only necessary to ask two questions of the people with disabilities you are closest to:

1. What are your favorite activities?
2. Who are your favorite people to be with?

The answers to these questions may surprise you. How often does the person do the activities they most enjoy and how often do they interact with their “favorite” people?

What is Community?

Defining Community

“Community” is a word that is thrown around a great deal in the field of developmental disabilities and it is often misunderstood. What are we talking about when we say “community?” John McKnight (1993) suggests that, “Community is a web of relationships that are informal... It is analogous to the wind- there is no visible presence but a powerful manifestation.” Community is not a place, an activity, or a location. It is not going on an outing to the movies or to the mall or the Natural History Museum on a van with other people who are labeled as disabled. These are things tourists do, not citizens of a community. Someone once described people with disabilities as tourists in their own town. If going to the mall or out to eat is an outing or an event instead of a common everyday experience, a person is a tourist and not a member of their community. In the most simple terms, it is the connectedness to everyday life and everyday relationships.

What does this connectedness to everyday life and everyday relationships really look like? This is a crucial question to ask ourselves because as Stephen Covey, author of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, explains that all things are created twice, once in our minds and once in reality. We must envision the concept of connectedness to community in our mind before we can ever think of making it a reality. In other words, we must begin with the end in mind.

Let’s take John for example. John is 34 years old and has the label of mental retardation. He lives in a group home with five other guys and works full time at a local hardware store. In what ways is John connected to his community?

John takes a bus to work and walks down his street for approximately a quarter mile to his bus stop. On the way he waves to his neighbors. He knows most of them by name and they know John’s name. At work he is well liked by his co-workers and occasionally goes out to eat with a small group of them after he gets off duty. He attends all company sponsored picnics, events, and functions. John plays indoor soccer during the winter and softball in the summer with his church softball league. The indoor soccer field is not on the bus line so a member of the team picks John up at his house. John attends a local church and has met many people there. Every

three of four months John invites one neighbor (a young couple with a small child) over to his house for dinner. The support staff in the group home helps John make lasagna for dinner because his neighbors said they really like it. John is also invited over to his neighbor's house for dinner at times and is invited to another neighbor's Christmas party. John likes to go out to eat pizza and every Friday night he goes to the local pizza parlor for supper. All the employees know John and know that his "usual" is a small pepperoni and mushroom pizza, fries, and a large cherry coke.

This is the "community" we are talking about.

What is Client Land?

If community is where we want to go, where are we now? Let's take a closer look at what I call, *Client Land*. This is a land where many people with disabilities live every day, and it is a life very different from a life of community. It may best be described with a story about a mother who gave birth to two sons (O'Connell, 1988).

A Mother and Two Sons

As babies, each of them, like all babies spent most of the time with their parents, being held and cuddled and loved. One son gradually moved off from his parents' arms to explore the world. On the street he found playmates; at school he made friends with kids in his class; at his job he joined co-workers for lunch and parties; in his apartment building neighbors would say hello; he had girlfriends and fell in love. Watching it all his mother reflected: At the beginning he had only his family, but by the time he was a young man he had surrounded himself with other people.

The other son also started out in his parents' arms. But he came with several disabilities, which were given one label or another, and those problems and labels got in the way of his exploring the world the way his brother had. Instead of having opportunities to define himself the way his brother had, his labels defined him, until most people could only see the problem, not the boy. Instead of opening out, his life closed in upon itself. Instead of family and friends gathering around him, they fell away. He went only to special schools and special programs. By the time he was fourteen, the only people who saw him regularly, besides his mother, were other people with disabilities and people who were paid to give him some service. "He had," said his mother, "no relatives, no friends, nothing to do . . ."

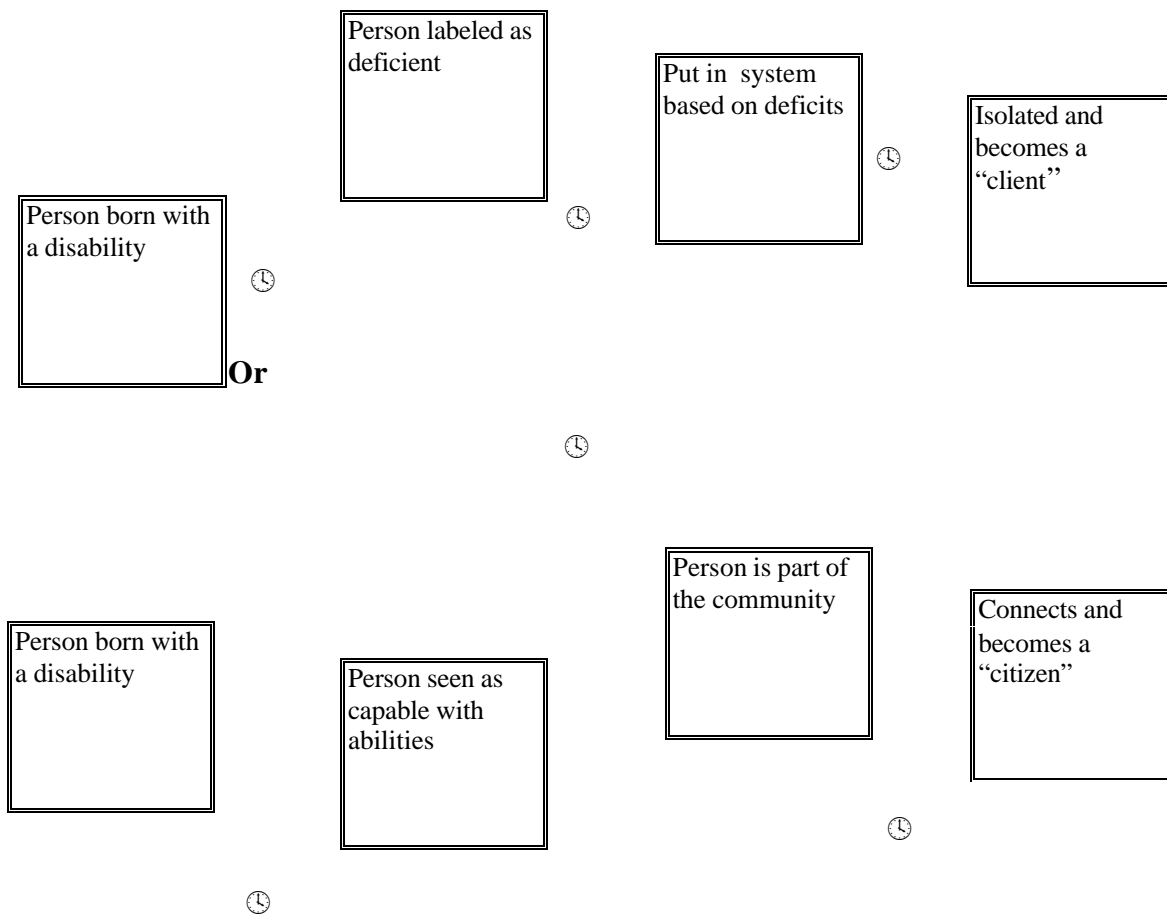
This is *Client Land*.

The Power of a Label

The very nature and structure of human service systems is based on deficiency. After all, a person must be deficient to get accepted into a program. They must become a "client" of the

service system. They must receive a label. Labels are powerful. They endure, restrict, suffocate, stereotype, and limit. They can take on a life of their own.

The theoretical process can be illustrated in the following manner:



As illustrated in the diagram, becoming isolated is a process that begins at birth. The labels and the years of stigma that accompany those labels, further entrenches the person into the role of “client.” *Client Land* is a unique place that is vastly different from the life of a person who is not labeled and in a service system. In the harshest of words, people with disabilities living in the service system can become commodities. They become slots in a program, beds in a unit, or a per diem in a system. They have a price tag on them. Their client status is how we stay in business. As a result, they are often treated as such, even if that treatment is not intentional. They have less control over their lives, less say about their future, and more external limitations placed on them. There may be some logical reasons for certain types of controls or safety measures, but at this time I am not questioning why, but only describing the current state of the

system.

Milton Tyree, the author of Positive Introductions, implores us to ask ourselves some questions on the powerful effects of *Client Land*:

How will people with disabilities learn about the ways of the world:

- ☞ *If they are not involved in real world events with other people who have experience in the everyday world?*
- ☞ *If they are continually introduced to “special,” separate, or simulated events/places instead of everyday ones?*

What happens to people’s sense of capability and purpose:

- ☞ *When always given easy things to do, because nobody believes they can do anything else?*
- ☞ *When they are introduced to tasks that are intended to keep them busy, instead of productive?*
- ☞ *When they are expected to “behave” while being presented with nothing to do at all?*
- ☞ *When they are given scarce levels of instruction or guidance and then blamed when they cannot perform?*

What happens to people’s sense of belonging and contribution:

- ☞ *When constantly introduced to people with whom they may have nothing in common (other than a disability) while being kept apart from the people everyone else knows?*
- ☞ *When so many aspects of their life are determined by their disability (relationships, school, work, home, entertainment...) when their disability is only one aspect of their identity?*
- ☞ *When always surrounded with people who want to help them while never having a chance to contribute to others?*

In short, Tyree, states that, “The essence of an individual’s identity remains hidden” (Tyree, 1994)

Jeff Foxworthy, the stand-up comedian, does a routine called, “You may be a redneck...” I have attempted to communicate some aspects of *Client Land* in the same spirit as Foxworthy’s redneck routine. Through humor we can look at ourselves and not feel as threatened. I call this “You may live in a group home,” and I have done it with many audiences. They often tell me there is a great deal of truth to it and often add their own to my list. Someone once said, “I have met the enemy, and he is me.” Unfortunately, I have been an active part in many of the following statements. Although the effect is not the same as if you heard them in person,

hopefully you can still relate to it written form. Each line is to be followed by the statement, you may live in a group home.

You May Live in a Group Home

- 👉 *If you go bowling every Saturday,*
- 👉 *If you have your underwear counted at least once a year,*
- 👉 *If you have to plan a social activity a week in advance,*
- 👉 *If you wear out of style clothes that are two sizes too big,*
- 👉 *If every person you hang out with is paid to be with you,*
- 👉 *If you have ever said, “Oh shit,” and then been told, “that’s not appropriate,”*
- 👉 *If you ever wanted to go banking but your checkbook is locked up in the house manager’s office,*
- 👉 *If you have ever taken a member of the opposite sex into your bedroom and were told to keep your door open,*
- 👉 *If you have ever been told that you cannot watch your favorite TV show because your daily schedule says its time for you to work on goal number 3,*
- 👉 *If you have ever gone out to a movie with your boyfriend/girlfriend and had it called an “outing” instead of a date,*
- 👉 *If you have ever asserted yourself by saying “No, I don’t want to do that right now” and have been accused of being non-compliant,*
- 👉 *If the day you moved into your new place and were given a 35 page manual describing rules and regulations for living there,*
- 👉 *If you ever wanted to spend some time alone in your room but couldn’t because it was time for your “peer interaction” goal,*
- 👉 *If you are in a job you don’t like but can’t get another one because you are one of those difficult people to place,*
- 👉 *If you have ever gotten a midnight craving for a snack but have been told the kitchen is closed,*
- 👉 *If you have ever gotten up late for work and missed your bus because you were told your not leaving this house until your bed is made,*
- 👉 *If you are 55 years old and you have to ask a recent high school graduate if it is okay to go outside,*
- 👉 *If you have ever been put on coffee restriction,*
- 👉 *If you have a job performance review with your boss and ten other people are sitting around the table,*
- 👉 *If you live with 8 or more people not related to you and people not of your choosing,*

The good news, however, is that *Client Land* is a place from which people can leave. The person can escape the social isolation with the support of people who are committed to the art of community connecting. The isolation did not happen overnight and the process of becoming a “citizen” will not take place overnight.

Escaping from Client Land

The next time you are at a staff meeting, and this subject comes up, tell the group at the meeting that you have a six point plan to assist people in escaping from *Client Land*. Tell people that we need to de-emphasize, declientize, destigmatize, create, relate, and celebrate. When they say “What ?” tell them again, but more slowly, that we need to:

- 👍 **De-emphasize** the focus on the disability and what people cannot do
- 👍 **Declientize** their life so they can be seen as a valuable person, not a commodity
- 👍 **Destigmatize** the effects of living in *Client Land* for so long
- 👍 **Create** valued social roles for people focusing on their capabilities
- 👍 **Relate** to people in a way that demonstrates their value and worth
- 👍 **Celebrate** a person's uniqueness and gifts

There is a line in a Garth Brooks song that says, "Life is not tried, it's merely survived, if you're standing outside the fire." *Client Land* is outside the fire.

A Father and His Daughter

Finally, the effects of *Client Land* and the realization of its effects, can be seen in a poem written by a father about his daughter (Snow, 1994)

Saturday Morning 7/17/93

I looked into Annie's Eyes this morning-

In this morning I looked in Annie's eyes. My daughter's eyes. I searched for what was wrong. What is her disability? As I looked in her eyes, at her hair blown by night's tossing and turning, she smiled and smiled. My heart hurt with sensations all over. Where is it? I could find no wrong with Annie in her beauty playing with her dog this morning.

Polly danced and barked. Annie sprayed water at Polly's barks. They danced around the room. I felt like I was coming through a thick fog this morning. I cannot see anything wrong with Annie. I cannot feel any where in my body that tight almost nauseous feeling I always have when I think I have seen what's wrong with Annie.

In this morning my body feels no tightness, no nausea as I look, and look at Annie. She is simply a beautiful, joy filled child having morning, spraying love and water at her barking dog, Polly.

I sit this morning feeling a trembling in my belly. How precious is this moment of me seeing Annie as she is.

I am angry for all the Labelers who have sought to steal my daughter's life.

I am sad that I have so many times taken their lies inside me seeing Annie as retarded or organic brain damaged or disabled or whatever. I have often seen my child with eyes of guilt and shame. I have been robbed of the present.

It is so obvious at this moment that there are only children. People filled with gifts and possibilities.

I feel my belly calm, warm, my heart trembling, my eyes with tears, my smile soft. I see Annie so clearly this moment of dog spraying laughter.

I know I do not have to live the Labelers lie. I know in this morning the truth.

Becoming a Social Guide?

Defining a Social Guide

What is a Social Guide? A Social Guide is a person who supports, encourages, and assists another person in becoming more connected to their community. This person could be called by many names- community connector, bridge builder, or community guide. The name is arbitrary, but the function is profound. It is not just a job description, but a mission or a calling.

What You Don't Need

Anyone can become a Social Guide. The only requirement is that you care about someone and want to assist them in becoming part of their community. You do not need to have a special degree or certification. You do not need a great deal of formal training. You do not need to have a certain job title. It does not have to be written in your job description. In fact, some people have been connecting people already without realizing it. They inherently knew it was important, and were doing it. The point is, whoever is reading this handbook can become a Social Guide.

What You Do Need

Although anyone can be a Social Guide, there are certain qualities that can enhance the process of community connecting. Often they are inherent in the individual, but can also be developed over time.

- 👍 Individuals who feel they do not have to "fix" someone. They see the inherent capacities and gifts in the person regardless of their disability.
- 👍 The individuals are already well connected in the interrelationships of community life. They are personally part of the web of community life.
- 👍 The individuals believe strongly that the community will accept a person with a disability.
- 👍 The individuals are very tenacious and do not give in easily. If one group does not accept an individual, they keep trying.
- 👍 They are committed to the cause of assisting people in becoming part of the citizenship of communities.
- 👍 They use a lot of four letter words like hope, care, and love.

A Social Guide, then, is a person who chooses to invest himself or herself in the life of a person labeled as disabled and one who will assist the person from a life of social isolation to a life of community.

what to Avoid

- 👉 **Preparation H-** Too many people experience what is known as “preparation hesitation” or “analysis paralysis.” I call it Preparation H and you get it by sitting around too long not doing anything. A person applies Preparation H in order to avoid doing anything with real significance. They tell themselves: “I cannot make a difference; This is too hard; I’ll get to it after this paperwork.” The list can go on forever. Preparation H is some strong stuff. It is used to analyze every little thing, obsessively plan for every contingency, or remain busy doing insignificant activities. A little Preparation H can be good. It can help you reach your goals, but be careful not to use it in lieu of getting down to business.

- 👉 **The Straight Path-** Not knowing what to do is okay. Sometimes you do not know what you will be doing because life is always changing, people are always changing, and situations are always changing. If someone tells you they have all the answers, don’t believe them because they are not telling the truth. Life is too complex and dynamic. The path will never be straight. When a rocket flies to the moon, 90% of the time, the astronauts are making course corrections. When I was younger I thought I knew everything, but now as I get older I am adopting a different philosophy. When I realize how little I know, the wiser I become. There are no set recipes for life or community connecting. Inaction is the enemy. The important thing is to just get started. To quote the Nike slogan, “Just Do It.”

- 👉 **The Energy Vampire-** Whenever you try to do something different, to strive to do something grand, there will be people out there that will tell you it cannot be done or it will take too much work. There are also other people out there who are always complaining or whining about the current state of events. I call these people the energy vampires and you must avoid them at all costs. Why? Because when you are around these kinds of people, they tend to suck the very life, enthusiasm, and energy right out of you. Be especially careful around these people because if you get bitten by one, you will become one.

A journey not a destination

Presence and participation

This handbook will give you some ideas and strategies, but the true learning will take place as you are doing it. To get you started, Dr. Ernie Pancsofar, an expert in community connecting, describes the process of community integration in three stages:

1. Being present
2. Having presence
3. Participating actively.

People move along this continuum from being present to actively participating. Showing up and

being present physically at church, for example, is different than talking with people, singing, joining the choir, assisting with the service, etc. Additionally, this process never really ends. Someone does not wake up one day and find themselves at the state of connection. The concept of connecting as a journey and not a destination is paramount. The author, Robert Louis Stevenson, once said, “It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive.” We must see the art of connecting in the same light. The analogy of the community as a spider web can help you in not becoming overwhelmed in the journey. The role of the Social Guide is to assist a person in making new strands, strengthening current strands, and even severing some old strands, possibly those strands connected to various parts of the service system which are no longer needed.

Circles of Friendship

Judith Snow, author of What’s Really Worth Doing and How to Do It: A Book for people who love someone labeled disabled (possibly yourself), states the progression of relationships can be seen as four concentric circles. Going from outside to inside, people move from the circle of exchange, to the circle of participation, to the circle of friendship, and to the final circle, the circle of intimacy. Ms. Snow describes the circle of participation as the key circle. “All people both build and sustain their place in community and a fulfilling network of friends and loved ones from their circle of participation.” The theme song for this third circle can be taken from the theme song of the television show Cheers. “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.” This is where it begins. If the “third circle remains barren, the person gains no new relationships, interests, or opportunities to build a fulfilling circle of close friendship and intimacy” (Snow, 1994).

Do not make the same mistake I made by trying to force someone from one circle to the next. When you do this you become a Social Stalker instead of a Social Guide. Connecting takes time and may or may not ever develop. The role of the Social Guide is to create the opportunity, stay vigilant, facilitate, and support it when it happens.

Participation, then, along with time, within the context of at least one supportive/committed relationship are the underpinnings for continued connections to the community. All our strategies and techniques are supplemental to this foundation.

So do not be afraid to get started and try some new things. Things will start to happen and you may surprise yourself.

“You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result.”- Gandhi

Developing a “River” Plan

With these thoughts in mind, let’s develop what I call a “river” plan. A river plan is fluid and flexible. It can change easily but sticks to a general course of action. In other words, it knows where it is going but can adapt to obstacles along the way. When a river encounters an obstacle in its path, it does one of three things. It flows right over the obstacle, it flows around the

obstacle, or it carries the obstacle down the river with it. Regardless of what it encounters, it is going to get where it needs to go. Our plan of community connecting needs to be like that river. We will have to flow over some things in our way, maneuver around some, or pick barriers right up and take them with us on the journey. The key, however, is to figure out how to deal with different obstacles. No matter what happens, there needs to be a commitment to keep on going because many obstacles will be encountered along the way.

I like how motivational speaker and author Les Brown describes how to deal with setbacks. He says if you fall down, try to fall on your back. Because if you fall on your back, you can look up. And if you can look up, you can get up. If you can get up, you can stay up. I added a few of my own- if you can stay up, you can get going. If you can get going, you can keep going. If you can keep going, you will eventually succeed. There are no failures, only learning experiences.

You Won't Get This Stuff at Harvard

Always remember community connecting is a learning experience. You will be very prepared even if you do not know exactly what you will be doing. You will be learning as you go. Let me give you a little advice for your journey. You do not have to be a rocket scientist to develop a plan for community connecting, you just need to follow these three simple rules in developing your game plan.

1. If something is not working, stop doing it.
2. If something is working, keep doing it.
3. Try new things, and if they work, keep doing them.

That is all you need to develop a community connecting plan, program, initiative, or goal. Apply these things to your life, and you will be surprised at how well they work. I think at times we all feel like we are on a treadmill, running but getting nowhere. If something is not working, try something else. To keep trying something that is obviously not working or making a difference in somebody's life is crazy. When you are stuck in the mud, do not keep spinning your tires. After all, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. If something is not working, most likely it will continue to not work unless it is altered. You will be surprised at how little changes in your approach can make great changes in the outcome.

Common Sense vs. Common Practice

At this point it is important to discuss the difference between common sense and common practice. Some of the things you will be reading in this handbook may seem like common sense, and we may think we are already doing these things. However, if we examine ourselves and our daily practices, we may discover that we are not putting into practice what we know to be inherently important. It takes a great deal of discipline in supporting someone in their goals of

community connecting. Although it may appear common, the resulting effect of these things can be profound. We must shift from thinking common sense to thinking common practice.

In the past five years, I must have read over 500 self-help and psychology books. I have two Degrees and almost a third. I have attended numerous workshops, seminars, and retreats. I have discovered something, however, something profound. All of that information and knowledge does not mean a thing if I do not put what I am learning into practice. It has only been recently that I have begun putting into practice some of the things I am reading. It is amazing how things change when you put into practice the principles you are learning. Think common practice and take common sense out of your vocabulary.

The components of the plan

Developing the Right Mind-Set: Lessons from Unlikely Sources

A lesson from Ward and the Beav

One day on the television show, Leave it to Beaver, a conversation took place between the Beav and his dad, and it went a little something like this:

Beaver: Gee, there's something wrong with about everything, isn't there dad?

Ward: Just about, Beav.

The Beaver is right, there is something wrong with about everything, but we cannot worry about those things. This message from the Beav is liberating to me. The world is imperfect. Great things can still be done in an imperfect world. We don't have to try to fix everything that is wrong. In fact, if we do try to fix it, we will become less helpful of others. It becomes a paradox. The more we try to fix an imperfect world, the less time we spend walking with people on their journey.

Avoid those "energy vampires" that suck the enthusiasm right out of you. They are always complaining and griping about something. Flee from them. They may suck you into the "blame and shame" game where we start to blame everyone else for all the things wrong with our agency, program, county, etc. Believe me, it is easy to become an energy vampire. We are all vulnerable. There are a lot of obstacles- time, money, staff, politics, resources, and bureaucracy.

You have to hang in there. You do great work. You are great. You will, however, encounter

problems, but that is okay, because you know why you are doing what you are doing. You have a mission. Neitzche, a philosopher, once said, “If you know the why, you can get through any how.” When people start complaining around you, do not give in to it.

A lesson from Viktor Frankl

Our attitudes can be an obstacle or a stepping stone. Can you guess the number one obstacle to community connecting? You may be surprised at the answer. The number one obstacle to assisting someone in becoming connected to their community is staff’s attitude or belief that it cannot be done.

The good news is, the choice is ours. No one else can control our attitudes. Viktor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor and psychiatrist, stated that, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms- to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” When you embark on this journey of community connecting with someone, you are going to be met with the inevitable frustration that accompanies positive change. As mentioned earlier, think of it as a journey and not a destination. You will not suddenly arrive one day. It is ongoing. The type of person-centered work we are doing here is different from the system-centered, disability paradigm focus that has been taking place. We are going to get frustrated, overwhelmed, feel unsupported, feel like we are not making a difference, and a variety of other feelings. But remember you cannot fail unless you give up. Choose to have a positive attitude.

A lesson from Don Quixote

Did you ever hear of Don Quixote? He was an eccentric man who believed he was a great knight. He battled windmills because in his mind he believed they were giants. He sang a song with the following line, “Dream the impossible dream, and fight the unbeatable foe.” His philosophy was that life was not worth living if he did not dream that impossible dream.

Don Quixote can teach us to keep our eyes focused on the goal. We will get there, just keep on going. Dream big dreams with people. “Determine the thing can and shall be done, and then we will find the way,” said Abraham Lincoln. When everyone else says it is impossible, do not believe them.

Every great achievement was once impossible until someone set a goal to make it a reality. Lewis Carroll’s famous masterpiece, Through the Looking Glass, contains a story that exemplifies the need to dream the impossible dream. There is a conversation between Alice and the Queen, which goes like this: “I can’t believe that!” said Alice. “Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying voice. “Try again, draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.” Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said. “One can’t believe impossible things.” “I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

People used to tell me I was naive. At first I believed that was a put-down, and I took offense to it. Now, however, when someone tells me I am naive, I say, “Thank you.” I take it as a

compliment. I still believe I can make a difference in another person's life. In a survey of Fortune 500 companies, only 7% strongly believed they could make a difference in their company.

How many impossible things have you imagined today? Four years ago the agency I work for imagined supporting people with disabilities in owning and living in their own home. Today, five people are doing just that.

A lesson from a Tree

When working with people, it is important to develop an active commitment to them. You must have a mind set that you are going to stick it out no matter what. I am afraid that we, including myself, have a tendency to give up too easily on people. It is just too hard. We have to fight this feeling because we may be somebody's last hope. When you feel like giving up, remember the lesson of the Japanese Bamboo Tree:

The Japanese Bamboo Tree is a very strange tree. You need to water it, feed it, and make sure it gets plenty of sunshine all throughout the first year, but strangely it doesn't grow at all. You need to do this again the second year, and again there is no growth. You do this again the third, fourth, and most of the fifth year, and again nothing happens. However, something almost magical happens during that 5th year. In a time span of about 3 months, the Japanese Bamboo Tree bursts forth and grows to an awesome 90 feet tall.

Keep on nurturing the people you are supporting, regardless of whether you see growth or not. Hang in there for the long haul. Take John, for example, whose file of eight years ago said he will probably never be able to live independently. Where is John today? You guessed it, he is living in his own apartment, has a good job, and goes out to eat almost every Friday for barbecued ribs. I would say he is about 90 feet tall. Take Darlene, for example, who was told she would probably never be able to work a community job because she does not have the ability or work ethic. Where is Darlene today? You guessed it again. She works at the Animal Ark Pet Shop, lives in her own apartment, has her own computer, and has an orange belt in Karate. I would say she, too, is about 90 feet tall.

So remember, beautiful things can happen in an imperfect world, choose to have a positive attitude, dream impossible dreams with people, and keep the dream alive for however long it takes. It will be worth it.

Did you know you were a goose?

Why did you get into this field? I am a little bit psychic, so let me guess. You entered this field because you get paid so much money, you cannot even spend it all. Your off-shore accounts cannot hold all your money. Am I right? Or maybe it is because everyday when you get off work, people come up to you and shake your hand because they just wanted to touch someone who contributes so much to mankind. Am I right? Obviously, I am doing a little tongue-in-cheek.

However, I ask this question all over the place and people tell me they chose this line of work because they wanted to make a difference in someone else's life, to impact someone in a positive way. The same reason why I entered this field.

Then I ask people, "Who made a difference in your life?" Most say a teacher, coach, parent, or friend. When I ask why that person made such a difference, they describe such things as this person believed in me, challenged me, cared about me when no one else did, loved me, encouraged me, and shared their life with me.

Research over the past forty years has found the relationships individuals have are the number one factor in assisting them in making positive steps in their life. Such things as believing in a person, caring about another person, and instilling a sense of hope are essential. Strategies, teaching techniques, and therapeutic methods are of secondary importance. You are the most important thing in someone else's life. Let me say that again. YOU are the most important thing in someone's life. It is not your background, your degree, your education, your income, your job title, but you and your ability to care, love, and believe in another person. You are accomplishing what you set out to do when you entered this field. You have and are making a profound difference in someone's life. You just may not know it yet.

We make the mistake of thinking that things we have are more important than our presence we can offer people. Someone once said, "Our presence is more important than our presents." Lisa, a five year old little girl, told her mom that she wished they could live in house like her friend Mary. Mary's house was very beautiful and very expensive. Lisa's mom knew they could never give Lisa that type of house or buy all the luxuries other children could have. When she asked Lisa why she wanted a house like Mary's, she was pleasantly surprised when she said, "So we can ride our bikes in the basement." Mary's house had an unfinished basement with a cement floor where the kids could ride their bikes and could play with their toys. She did not care about the beautiful house and all of the luxuries. It is our presence and other profound, although seemingly insignificant, things that make a difference.

Do you remember the fable about the golden goose who laid golden eggs? Every morning the goose laid a golden egg which the farmer cashed in for money. Soon, however, the farmer became greedy and impatient. In order to get at the rest of the eggs inside the goose, he killed the goose. We all know the moral of the story-once the goose was killed he could not produce any more eggs. You are that golden goose, so take time to take care of yourself. Every once in a while you need to be re-goosed. A continual investment in goosing is healthy.

A lesson from Timmy

The good thing about caring and giving to another person is that when you do these things, you do not lose anything yourself. In fact, you often gain more than you give. If you have to work eight hours a day, you might as well give to another person and invest yourself. A verse in the Bible states that, "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed" (Proverbs 11:25).

I would like to share a little story with you about a young boy named Timmy:

One day after school Timmy told his mother that his class was having a Valentine's Day party the following day and he wanted to make valentines for the kids in his class. His mother let out an inaudible sigh as she looked down at her sweet boy. She was worried about him. Timmy was not a popular boy. He was skinny with freckles and very uncoordinated. The other children often teased him on the playground and on the schoolbus. She was afraid he would make all these valentines for the other kids but his kindness would not be returned.

Timmy, however, was set on making the valentines, and his mother's worries remained unsaid. So together they pulled out the construction paper, crayons, scissors, glue and lace. For several hours Timmy and his mother went down the class list and made valentines. Timmy painstakingly addressed each one with a red crayon, and when they were through, stacked them all neatly in a shoebox. Twenty-six envelopes in all.

The next morning she said good-bye to her son as he walked to catch the bus, his shoebox tucked snugly under his arm. All day she worried about him, picturing him sitting at his desk with no valentines of his own to open. She made his favorite chocolate chip cookies and timed them perfectly so they would still be warm when he walked in the door. Hopefully, they would cheer him up.

She watched the clock in the den and she watched the road for her son. After just a moment longer, she saw him walking up the driveway with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jacket, the valentine box nowhere to be seen. "What a strong boy", she thought to herself. As he entered through the door, she asked him how his day was and told him she had made cookies. He looked up at her with his big brown eyes and said, "Not a one mom, not a one. Not one single valentine." Her heart broke as she scooped him up into her arm, hugging him tightly to her chest. She then heard him say again, "Not one, mom. I didn't forget a single one. I made a valentine for every single boy and girl in my class. They all got a valentine." He then broke the embrace, skipped into the kitchen, and grabbed a cookie. From the other room he yelled, "What's for supper, Mom?"

Giving is what makes the difference. Do not ask yourself what it is going to cost you if you give of yourself, but ask what it is going to cost the rest of the people out there if you do not.

Are you a Nascar staff?

There is a big problem out there in the human service field? Too many of us are suffering from what is known as the "Nascar" syndrome. The epidemiology of this syndrome can be described in this manner. We, as staff persons, race around our agencies writing IP's, doing paperwork, filling our forms, going to committee

meetings, talking on the phone, and writing new policies. Every so often we pull over to the side for a pit stop of quality time with the people we are supporting. Then we gun our engines and we are back on the track, racing to get all of our paperwork completed and committee meetings scheduled. If we want to make a difference in the lives of the people we are supporting, we need to treat and cure the “Nascar” Syndrome.

If you want to make a difference in someone’s life and help them with the goal of community connecting, the first step is to start making deposits in the person’s emotional bank account. Stephen Covey, author of the best seller Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, describes this emotional bank account in great detail. In short, however, it can be said that people do not care about how much you know until they know how much you care. Unfortunately, many of us are terribly overdrawn when it comes to our emotional accounts with other people. Items that can increase the account include:

- 👍 Being kind
- 👍 Keeping promises
- 👍 Returning calls
- 👍 Actually getting back with people later when you say you will
- 👍 Listening
- 👍 Understanding
- 👍 Forgiving
- 👍 Honoring
- 👍 Spending time

Take off your hat of teacher, program assistant, nurse, supervisor or whatever other title you may have and simply be with the person. Talk, listen, go shopping, go out to eat, or see a movie. Examine how you treat persons with developmental disabilities. Examine your tone, your body language, your time, your verbal language, and your attitude. Be conscious of making deposits in the emotional bank account.

An example of this is a person named Mark who was a direct support staff in a group home. Mark was responsible for teaching some of the individuals cooking, budgeting, and other daily living skills. I noticed that Mark spent a great deal of time with these individuals in non-teaching environments. He would spend time talking with them, building relationships, and having a cup of coffee after dinner. He also spent time doing some of the ladies’ hair. He would braid their hair, give them different styles, and show them different ways they could wear it. They really enjoyed it. On the surface it looked like Mark was not really teaching anything. However, because they liked being with Mark and knew he cared about them, he was able to be more effective and efficient in teaching them those daily living skills they needed to learn.

A research study of 160,000 young people asked what they most wanted from teachers, coaches, parents, etc. Overwhelmingly, their top two answers were to love and listen to me.

This may be difficult for you because you may be used to being in charge, used to teaching, used to giving instructions. You may have to bite your tongue and refrain from teaching,

correcting, or directing. The key is to spend time with the person, getting to know them, listening to them, and learning from them. During those hours of seemingly insignificant time, you may very well learn more than you ever thought possible. Things come out in the context of relationships which do not come out in a meeting.

Recognizing the Gifts

Disability Paradigm

As you are building a relationship with the person, you can use this time to start identifying a person's gifts. This is very important because most of us in this field have a tendency to cling to what Judith Snow calls the Disability Paradigm. We are trained to locate and focus on a person's disabilities. As mentioned earlier, the service system is set up around the disability.

A person's gifts often get lost. They are not recognized and, as a result, are not nurtured or supported. They lie dormant or may even wither and die. Lee Graber, a professional educator, describes this as he relates of a story of a young lady who was Native American. She was taken away from the reservation and placed in a group home with other adults labeled with mental retardation. Her Native American heritage was not encouraged or supported. One day Mr. Graber was speaking with this young lady and asking her to tell him what she liked to do and what were her dreams. She went on to describe things of the reservation and her culture, but then she paused and said, "But that was when I used to be an Indian."

Giftedness Paradigm

It's time for us to start recognizing people's gifts, goals, and dreams. Judith Snow describes this as the Giftedness Paradigm. Every person is unique and has gifts, but may be hidden behind the file, the label, the behavior problems, etc. We must change the way we think about people and must be relentless in finding someone's gifts, because they are often hidden well. All of us, regardless of disability, have gifts, strengths, and capabilities.

A lesson from Mulah

Best selling author and educator, Leo Buscalia, tells the story of a little man named Mulah:

"One day a man named Mulah was in the street on his hands and knees, obviously looking for something. As he was searching, another man stopped and inquired about what Mulah was looking for so earnestly. Mulah replied that he lost his key and was trying to find it." The other man said he would be happy to help him look and he too bent down on his hands and knees. After several moments, the man asked Mulah where about did he lose the key. Mulah replied, "I lost the key in my house." Very confused, the man asked, "Why on Earth, Mulah, are you looking for your key outside here in the

street?” Mulah replied, “My friend, I am looking out here because there is more light.”

Sometimes finding the gifts in people can be difficult. They may have lived a life where their deficits have been focused upon, nurtured, and strengthened. Where did they get these negative behaviors? **No one is born with them. Quite simply, they have learned them.** As motivational speaker, Lee Graber, said, **“They have proven that they can learn, we have yet to prove we can teach.”** He goes on to describe education as the relentless pursuit of capability. **I often wonder how relentless I am in pursuing capability. Do not make the same mistake as Mulah did. Be more diligent in where you look for gifts. Get out your candles. You may find the key which opens up a whole new life for a person, and I’ll wager it will not be out where “there is more light.”**

“But, Scott,” some of you are saying, **“You don’t know the kinds of people I work with on a daily basis.”** Let’s have a dose of reality here. **It is important to note that I am not advocating a “pollyanna” everything will just be rosy if you believe type of attitude. There are some major problems and difficulties. There are some people out there with disabilities you will not like, and, in fact, cannot stand. Is that okay? Sure it is. Prejudice is singling out a group of people because of a difference but also not singling out a group of people because of a difference. It is okay not to like someone. The fact they have a disability, has nothing to do with it. However, when dealing with people, it is important to remember that “hurt people, hurt people.” People are hurting and have a great deal of emotional baggage they are carrying around. You can help them lighten the load by gaining some perspective. At one point in my life I was a pathetic listener instead of an empathic listener. I still struggle in really listening to people. The expression “hurt people, hurt people” helps me to step back and see where a person is coming from. With all the labels and diagnoses we can give people, one diagnosis can be very helpful:**

Diagnosis: People are hurting

Prognosis: They want to stop hurting

The RAS

Something that can help you recognize the gifts in people is called a Reticular Activating System (RAS). All of us have one of these in our brains. The RAS acts as a kind of filter that helps us catch things that we have decided to look for and helps us ignore things that do not matter. Because there is so much stimuli in our environment, we need this system in order to survive and weed out bits of information that are not important. Here is how the RAS works. Let’s say you are looking to purchase a used car. Once you decide on this it seems like suddenly you start noticing things related to car sales. You see car ads in the paper, cars for sale sitting in parking lots, books about cars, conversations people are having about cars, and anything to do with cars. Your brain starts to look for these things and picks them out automatically, virtually on a subconscious

level. All those things about cars were there before, you were just not attuned to them.

The RAS can also search for gifts and capabilities in a person. Once you decide to start actively searching for someone's gifts they will start popping out all over the place. Qualities you have never thought of as gifts or noticed before will come to the surface. One lady told a story about a young man who got a job based on a gift of his, a gift no one recognized. This young man worked for a big research company who had a lot of copying and shredding to do of classified and confidential information. This young man was perfect for the job because he could not read. His inability to read suddenly became a gift to this company. No one thought of this as a gift before, but it truly was a gift in this case. There are many gifts out there, we just need to look.

I would like to share with you another story about a young boy who was seven years old.

One day this boy stood outside in his backyard with ball and bat in his hand. He said out loud to himself, "I am the greatest baseball player of all time." He then threw the ball into the air in front of him and swung the bat. He missed. He bent down to pick it up and repeated again, "I am the greatest baseball player of all time." He threw it again and missed for the second time. With a determined look on his face, he picked it up again and in a very authoritative voice said once more, "I am the greatest baseball player of all time." He threw it up again, took a great big swing, but to no avail. Strike three. The boy frowned. He thought for a moment and his frown turned into the biggest smile you had ever seen. And in that same authoritative voice he said, "I am the greatest baseball pitcher of all time."

Be relentless in finding and nurturing those gifts.
Make yourself a reminder to find a gift every day.
Put a post-it note on your forehead if you have to,
but remember to look for them.

Expanding Horizons

While you are hunting down those gifts, start treating people as though they have gifts, are capable, and are going places. When they walk in the room, make the world a party. The great poet Longfellow once said, "If you treat a person as he is, he will remain as he is, but if you treat a person how he ought to be, he will become what he ought to be." People often rise to the level of expectations others have of themselves. In a very real sense, we are the mirror for other people. They internalize other peoples' views, attitudes, stereotypes, and expectations. Often people develop what is called "learned helplessness." They learn that they do not have much to offer or have many capabilities because very little is expected or demanded. Studies have shown that students with mental retardation had less hopeful expectations for their future than did peers without disabilities (Palmer and Wehmeyer, 1998).

If you tie a baby elephant to a stake, he is too small to pull it out. After a little while he stops trying because he has learned he is too weak to do it. When he becomes an adult he is more than able to yank that stake out, but he does not because in his mind he is still too weak. He has experienced "learned helplessness." We need to start helping people have "learned helpfulness."

Re-drawing the life picture

We can start teaching learned hopefulness by giving people a blessing. One way we can do this is by honoring people. Honoring can be defined as placing high value on a person. How much do we honor people with disabilities? How much do we value them? This is a tough question we must ask ourselves. We treat people, albeit consciously or unconsciously, in the direct proportion to how much we value them.

Honoring a person is a choice on our part. We choose what we value and how we value something or someone. It lies within our power.

John Trent and Gary Smalley, in their book The Blessing, suggest that we can help others develop a “learned hopefulness” by helping them develop a positive life picture and future for themselves. We do this by helping them imagine a positive future for their life. We can describe it to them in vivid language and pictures. We can support them, believe in them, and nurture them until they can see that picture for themselves. It gives them hope where there was no hope for a life that is meaningful and full. Psychologist, Paul Torrance, suggests that a person’s image of the future may be a better predictor of future attainment than past performances.

If I ask you to picture a “mclidifibit” you will not be able to do it because it is a nonsense word I made up. You have never experienced a “mclidifibit” and have no frame of reference or context to put it in. As a result, you cannot picture one. Similarly, if a person has never had a fulfilling, positive life, he or she may not be able to picture it for the same reasons. They have no context or frame of reference from which to create an ideal life picture. As a Social Guide, you can help them to create this picture and then make it a reality. You can do it through your words, your actions, exposure to new events, providing choices and opportunities, and providing on-going support.

It’s time for Jubilee

People need to be given another chance, a fresh start. What we all need at times is a Jubilee. What is that you ask? A Jubilee was a practice the Hebrew nation practiced back in the times of the Old Testament. Every fifty years, a Jubilee was declared. It was a big celebration symbolizing a fresh start. Everyone in prison was set free, transgressions were forgiven, relationships were amended, and all debts were canceled.

I think people with disabilities need a Jubilee declared, especially those labeled as having behavior problems. They need a fresh start, their files wiped clean, and a new beginning. Don’t we all?

Welcoming Place

It is also important to create a “welcoming place” for people where they feel good about themselves and about life. Imagine going to a dinner party where you do not know many people and everyone seems to be talking in their own group of friends. No one welcomes you, introduces you to other people at the party, or engages you in a conversation. You feel out of place and wonder why you are even there or if anyone likes you. I think many people with

disabilities go to this dinner party more than we realize.

One morning a mother called up to her son who was late for school, “John, get out of bed. You’re going to be late.” John replied, “I don’t want to go. All of the kids don’t like me and the teachers don’t care. Give me one good reason, why I should go to school.” The mother, in her infinite wisdom, yelled back up to her son. “John, I will give you two good reasons. One, you are forty-three years old, and two, you are the principal.”

Everyone wants to be liked and to be welcomed. Create that place. Instead of going to that dinner party, we need have people take a ride on the “Love Boat.” Do you remember that television show? Every person on that ship was welcomed and treated accordingly by the captain on down to the bartender. They made people feel good for being who they were. Let’s give people a ticket to the Love Boat instead of an invitation to that dinner party.

Welcome people with your words, actions, time, and money. I read a story about a woman who was fed up with life and the people in a world that was cold and lonely. She decided she would give people one last chance to prove they could care and love. She came to the conclusion that if one person said hello or smiled at her on her mile long walk to the city bridge, she would not jump. A week later they found her body in the river and a suicide note on her kitchen table.

Developing the Connection Plan

It is critical that you develop a plan for assisting someone in developing more relationships and becoming more connected to their community. In the Client Land there are so many Plans- IP’s, IEP’s, ISP’s, IDP’s, and on and on. We do not want to have those kinds of plans. Why not? A parent summed it up best when he said, “For the past ten years I have gone to all these IP’s every three months, and in all those years I can think of only one meeting where something ever got done.” Since we like the alphabet soup so much, IP’s need an I.V. and a little C.P.R. to revive them. IV stands for integrity and vulnerability and CPR stands for creativity, proactivity, and respect.

Avoid the Tax Seminar

IP meetings are often very formal, around a conference table, with people in suits taking notes who may not even know the person in question well. Who does the talking in those meetings? It is often the person with the highest degree or highest position of the agency in attendance. The person with the disability and the person directly caring for or supporting the person often remain silent or do not share their true feelings. They suddenly become mute. Why? Because we teach

them to be mute. “Don’t think of me as your boss, but think of me as a friend who is always right.”

When having these meetings, remember that a person’s degree or position are not the most crucial factors. Ph.D stands for “person having delusions” if they think they know the person the best. And I include myself in this, because I have made this mistake more times than I can

count. We must empower the people directly receiving services, family members, and front line staff who know the person best. Those of us with the suits just need to be quiet for awhile. This was a tough lesson for me to learn.

Any type of planning meeting needs to be in a comfortable place, such as a person's living room, a kitchen table, or at a restaurant over dinner. It should be informal, personal, and empowering. We must remember to check our ego at the door. I suggest this gathering be viewed as a group of people who care about someone, want to listen, and want to discover what the person wants out of life and how relationships and community play a part. Do not use jargon. Talk using your everyday language.

Focus on Gifts

It is also a good idea to discuss a person's strengths and gifts (Please see Appendix A-1 for some questions you may want to ask). Several exercises can assist in this process. They are called the "Gift Exercise" and "This is Your Life" (Appendix A-2 and A-3). It is imperative that we escape from the disability paradigm discussed earlier and enter the realm of the giftedness of each individual. Secondly, a "Relationship Map" can be done to get a feel for a person's network of relationships (Please see Appendix A-4). This will give you a starting point from which to begin. Remember, there is no universal recipe for having these type of planning meetings. Respect, creativity, empowerment, and listening are the foundations.

Three Target Areas

To help you get started, here are three target areas for connections:

1. Getting to know current acquaintances better
2. Getting re-connected with old friends
3. Meeting new people

Current acquaintances may be people at the person's job, church, sport's league or wherever else they spend time. One example is to ask, "Is there anyone at work you would like to get to know better?" If someone does not speak, you can use behavioral cues and call the place of employment to see who they like to be around. A follow-up question may be, "What makes you want to get to know them better?" This can give you some insight into what the person is looking for in a relationship. A person may communicate that the person is nice, funny, or because he likes motorcycles.

An untapped resource is to help people meet their neighbors. As a Social Guide, you can assist the person in meeting their neighbors by introducing themselves, walking over to talk to them when they are outside, or bringing out a glass of lemonade when their neighbor is working in the yard. The options are endless. After they become familiar with their neighbors, you can assist the person in inviting them over for dinner, Monday Night Football, or another activity. We cannot be afraid to ask. Even if we are afraid, we can ask anyway.

A good strategy for meeting new people is to find out the interests a person has or enjoys. These items can be included in their biography. After interests are identified, a Social Guide can then start searching for groups of people that somehow express that interest. For example if someone likes to dance, there are all kinds of dancing activities that meet regularly- square dancing, country line dancing, dance aerobics, ballroom dancing, dance clubs, dance lessons, tap dancing, ballet, and many more.

Interest expansion

Often, people with disabilities have a limited exposure to a variety of activities and, therefore, choose bowling, for example, by default because it is all they have experienced. A Social Guide can help by expanding someone's repertoire of activities. Please see Appendix A-6 for an activity to assist with this process.

When I was directly working with some individuals, I wanted to introduce them to some new activities, so I accompanied them to a karate class. Most of them had never experienced this type of activity before. After taking a few lessons and workshops on self-defense, four of them chose to join a karate school and have fallen in love with the sport. This has been a vehicle for helping them meet other people and share their love of Karate.

Social Guides, as well as the individual they are guiding, are going to be challenged to step outside their comfort zone.

Searching for Connections

Elementary My Dear Watson

Once some ideas are developed and prioritized, the next step is to make them a reality. A Social Guide now needs to become Sherlock Holmes. His or her mission is to search out the community for a place where the individual's interests, gifts, and strengths can be shared and expressed.

There are really no right or wrong ways to approach this process. Just get started and work from there. Community groups exist for almost any interest of a person. One person states that, "Everyone has a ticket out of isolation- the key is for someone to find the ticket and punch it" (O'Connell, 1988).

Imagine you are riding in a helicopter far above your city, and you have a special infrared machine which can spot possible connections. What areas in your community could be potential welcoming places for people you are guiding? Take a moment to brainstorm and write them down (Please see Appendix A-5).

Start Asking...

The best way to start is to ask the people and community associations. You may be surprised of how receptive people are in welcoming others into their circle. "Hospitality is not a heroic event,

but a commonplace part of everyday life" (O'Connell, 1988). It is often not the hospitality of the community that presents an obstacle to community connecting. Instead, as we discussed previously, it is the attitude of the staff and other professionals who have the belief the community will not be accepting or open to people with disabilities (Amado, 1990).

You can start by calling people you know, looking in the phone book, calling churches, newspapers, the Chamber of Commerce, and the local community chest services. "It is not a matter of designing programs but of creating visions, not of following protocols but fulfilling dreams"(O'Connell, 1988). Doors will open and networking will begin until a potential match and a potential community group is found.

An example of networking occurred during a connection planning session with a young woman named Ann. During a brainstorming session, Ann said she was interested in drama, among other things. It just so happened one of the individuals in the meeting was good friends with the director of a community theater troupe. One call later a connection was made.

Introductions

Once a connection is located, introductions are the next step. Introducing a person with a disability is an art. When you speak with a neighbor or members of group, for example, do not use jargon or give a "case history." Be honest. Tell the person you have a friend who has a disability and is interested in becoming involved with your group or getting to know you better. Emphasize the common interests, such as the person and the group are both interested in sewing. Emphasize the strong qualities the person has to offer and any necessary needs the person may have. Ask if they would be willing to meet the person and see all the great qualities he or she has to offer.

Explain your role as the Social Guide- to assist the person in making more friends and getting out in the community more. You will have much more time to explain your role and the importance of community connection with the person as you assist in fostering relationships between the person and the community members.

Mary O'Connell (1988) states that "the language of social services is sterile." She recommends when introducing people to tell that person's "story" and "the language used to tell these stories has to be alive with images: images like opening doors, breaking down walls, building bridges, and bringing those who are exiled home."

You may be surprised at the receptiveness you may encounter as illustrated in the following story (Amado, 1990).

Art has a real interest in history. A few miles outside of town, the historical society has maintained a country general store that is open in the summer. The group thought Art would enjoy volunteering at the store, and Art agreed to give it a try. The person who volunteered to call the woman in charge of coordinating volunteers made a long list of reasons why Art should be a volunteer. She was expecting some hesitation if not resistance. When she made the call, the woman in charge said "yes" before the person had a chance to give her even one good reason.

Once the initial contact is made and the group or individuals are willing to meet the person, the introduction is the next step. First impressions are extremely important. Social Guides need to make sure the person maintains good hygiene and is dressed appropriately for the type of social function. During the prior discussion with the community members, if one occurs, you may want to point out any unusual behaviors that may be odd at first or any needs the person may have. **Only** point these out if they are **necessary** and always give assurance that you will be there to help the person adjust. Amado (1990) illustrates this point in the following example:

Patrick, who is 19 years old, has seizures. Sometimes he makes strange hand movements and he has a number of other unusual habits. A couple of other teenage boys were going to meet him and go bowling. His group debated a long time on what to tell the boys. Should they tell them nothing and just see how well they like Patrick? Or should they tell them everything Patrick might possibly do that might seem bizarre? The person who introduced them finally decided the other boys should know that it was possible that Patrick would have a seizure, and what the seizure might be like, and that they should be assured that the staff person would be there to manage things. The first time Patrick flicked his fingers in the air, she told the boys what that meant- that Patrick was having a good time.

Remember that first impressions and how you describe someone's reputation can assist or hinder the assimilation into a community network. The goal is to focus on the positives while being realistic about the needs.

Prepare the person you are guiding about what to expect and how to behave. This can be done by discussion and role playing. It may even help to drive by the building or go inside when no one is there so the person can become comfortable with the surroundings.

It is important that you accompany the person until the person and group feel comfortable. If the person is being introduced to a group it may be better if they are introduced to the leader or a few of the members before being introduced to the entire group. This, however, will depend on the situation and the group. Each situation will be different, but as you gain experience, your intuition will help you.

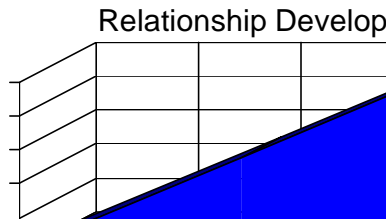
Here are some other tips about introductions (Amado, 1990):

- 👉 Treat each person as an individual, and introduce people on an individual basis.
- 👉 Avoid using jargon and initials (MR, CP).
- 👉 Emphasize the characteristics the individual has in common with all people.
- 👉 Do not share information that points out the individual's weaknesses or problems unless it is necessary in that situation. Do not "gossip" about what is wrong or different about him or her. When this information must be shared, do it as positively as possible.
- 👉 Do not exaggerate the individual's need for professional help.

Developing Relationships

Julia Childs

As mentioned universal fostering people think that We always secret technique (Pogrebin, however, there are no easy techniques or quick fixes. It can be no other way because relationships are so diverse and dynamic.



can't help us here

earlier, there is no template or recipe for relationships. Some "friendship is like sex. suspect there is some we don't know about" (1987). Unfortunately,

However, you can still be prepared and have a plan. It becomes somewhat of a paradox, because the plan continually needs to be altered since relationships are always changing. Ernie Pancsofar (1995) captures this conceptual paradox by saying you must have a plan but should not always follow it and you can be prepared even though you do not know exactly what you are going to say or do. Improvisation and going with the moment are the key.

How do relationships develop?

Amado (1990) states that "there is no recipe for turning a casual acquaintance into a true friendship." Often, when we meet someone it just "clicks" and friendships begin to develop, almost like magic. Other times, friendships grow more slowly and steadily over time as people get to know each other better. Unfortunately, we cannot perform or program magical friendships for people with disabilities nor are we asking for the Social Guides to perform an act of magic. What we are asking and what we can do, however, is to assist people in meeting as many people as possible who share a common interest, support those connections, and then promote on every occasion the development of a relationship (Amado, 1990). By increasing the time and activities a person spends with others, we are increasing the chances that relationships will develop:

Before specific tips and suggestions are given, four main themes concerning relationships must first be explored (Amado, 1990).

Themes of Relationships

Time: The first issue that impacts a relationship is time. All relationships take some amount of time to develop. Usually, the more time people spend with each other, the higher the chance a relationship will begin to develop. For example, often friendships are forged at work because people spend a significant amount of time with the people on their job. Thus, the amount of time and the quality of time a person spends with another is going to impact the development of a relationship between those two individuals. Obviously, then, it is important for the person with a disability to spend significant amounts of time with others in a variety of relationship building activities to optimize the building of relationships.

Intensity: The second issue that impacts a relationship is the intensity, or the amount of “meaning” attributed to a relationship. Some relationships have more meaning and have more importance than others. People usually have a variety of relationships that fall all along the continuum of intensity. The most concentration needs to be on the relationships which have the potential for the most meaning to an individual.

Intimacy: The third issue involves a level of trust. Intimacy and the sharing of confidences develops over time as individuals get to know each other. It is going to take time for individuals to develop any kind of “intimate” relationship.

Reciprocity: The final component involves the exchange of services between people. Individuals both give and receive a variety of things in a relationship including companionship, fun, emotional support, practical support, and the sharing of major parts of life and work. It is important that both individuals in the relationship reciprocate these things so the relationship does not become one-sided with one always giving and the other always receiving.

A little reassurance goes a long way

It is also important to note that many personal challenges exist that may need to be overcome in the process of attempting connections to the community. The person with a disability often lacks experience with making friends or has had some negative experiences with reaching out to others. As a result, the person lacks confidence. He or she may need a great deal of support, encouragement, and time to break out of this pattern. The Social Guide needs to be cognizant of this need for reassurance and try to meet it.

A second pattern which may have developed is one where the individuals have been hurt or rejected by others numerous times and, for self-protection, may have built a “wall” around themselves. They may push people away because they do not want to get hurt again. One woman described it in this manner: “I know my parents love me and only did what they thought was best. But they put me in the institution when I was only a very little girl. For a long, long time I cried and cried because I missed them so much. Then I stopped crying. I think about this, but I still have my prickly shell. Knowing about it doesn’t make it go away” (O’Brien and O’Brien, 1993).

A third challenge to overcome is that the individuals may be comfortable with their present relationships and activities because they are afraid to reach out (O’Brien and O’Brien, 1993).

They may want to make more friendships and get more involved in the community, but fear is holding them back. Again, a great amount of support and encouragement may be necessary to assist the person in working through their feelings. Change is frightening and the support of the Social Guide and all individuals in the person's life is critical.

Specific Ideas for Supporting Individuals in the Development of Relationships

Just as we would not teach a person how to swim by throwing him or her into deep water, we would not throw a person with a disability into community life without providing supports to maximize success (Holden, 1993).

Supports are defined as “procedures and activities which prevent people from falling, hold people in position, or make people capable of bearing or withstanding” (Holden, 1993). Supports for community inclusion are like “flotation devices or life preservers that are used to teach someone to swim or to guard against danger when he/she is in water over his/her head. Supports for inclusion are activities that make the experience a positive one for all concerned” (Holden, 1993). As mentioned earlier, improvisation is the key, but here are some specific suggestions that may help.

Modeling

It is important that the Social Guide models the appropriate behaviors in social situations. This includes such things as greeting new people, making conversations, asking questions, wearing appropriate attire, and arriving on time. Modeling is a powerful way to demonstrate appropriate interpersonal relationship skills. A Native American proverb states that, “Lightning in the hand is better than thunder in the lips.” In other words, talk is cheap. It is important to be a good role model.

Encouraging and Assisting Reciprocity

As discussed previously, the exchange of social activities or reciprocity is a vital part of building relationships. If only one person in a relationship is doing the giving and not getting anything in return, the relationship will probably not last very long. As a Social Guide, it is important to encourage and/or assist the individual in reciprocating in the relationship. This may include encouraging the individual to shake hands, introduce themselves, hold a conversation, or ask appropriate questions. Reciprocation could also be demonstrated by inviting group members out for coffee or other activities, giving appropriate compliments, listening to others, bringing refreshments to the meeting when appropriate, giving cards or gifts when appropriate such as Christmas, birthday, or thank you cards, and offering a variety of types of assistance when appropriate (this will depend on the type of situation and group). The key is to assist the person in being an active, contributing member of the group and the relationships among the group.

Using Social Prosthetic Devices

Social prosthetic devices are those things that can assist individuals in making a social contact or demonstrate a common interest with another person. It can be looked at as a social “ice breaker” that doesn’t involve verbal communication (Ernie Pancsofar, 1995). Examples may include shirts or jackets with sports team logos, hats, patches, books, or anything that may show a common interest and start a conversation. For example, if someone wears a shirt that says “I Love Soccer” it will automatically catch the attention of anyone in the group who likes soccer. A common interest is found and a relationship can start to be developed around that common interest. Ernie Pancsofar (1995) gives a wonderful example of the power of a social prosthetic device. One man with a physical disability who used a wheel chair was on a college campus when another person noticed a Harley Davidson insignia on the back of his wheel chair. The two started talking about motorcycles and their love for Harley’s. It turned out that the one man had a Harley with a side car and asked the man in the wheel chair if he wanted to go for a ride. Instantaneously, a relationship began to be formed. This probably would not have happened if the one man did not notice the Harley Davidson insignia.

80/20 Rule

The 80/20 rule is a rule that has been proven to be successful and effective in a great variety of business and professional arenas. Simply stated, 80% of your time should be spent with those individuals and companies which are the most interested or have the potential to bring the greatest profit. The remaining 20% of your time should be spent on trying to create new business or get new customers. In other words, do not waste your time searching for new avenues of business growth, but instead spend the time with the companies that will benefit you the most.

This principle can also be used in community connecting. You should not try to assist the individual in building relationships with all members of the group. Instead, he or she should spend the majority of the time facilitating relationship building with a few people who show the most interest and those relationships that have the greatest potential for growth and interpersonal satisfaction.

Friend biography

It may be helpful if the Social Guide assists the person in creating a companion list of all the people in the group (Please see Appendix A-7). Often the group leader can provide a list with phone numbers and addresses of the members. It may even include the birthdays of the members. Information can be added to the list as the individual begins developing relationships. Examples of items which someone could add would be birthdays, the person’s interests, or even favorite foods. Using the 80/20 principle, the relationships which show the most interest and satisfaction for both parties should be pursued strongest. These individuals can be highlighted in some manner on the companion list.

From the information on the lists, the Social Guide can assist the individual in practicing things to say or questions to ask. The Guide can also assist in planning activities and inviting the person out according to shared interests. The person can also write letters or call on appropriate occasions. All of these activities have the potential and may lend themselves to building quality

relationships.

Time and Involvement

In order to optimize the chances that a relationship will develop, it is important for the individual to spend some significant time with others in the group. The more involved the person is and the more amount of time spent, the greater the chances a relationship will begin to bloom. One guiding principle is to try to focus on relationship building activities wherein individuals can interact and participate rather than other types of activities.

Breaking Bread

A social activity that often promotes relationships is eating together, also known as “breaking bread” together. People are often the most comfortable and relaxed when eating, and there is something inherent in sitting down together for a meal that promotes intimacy. Eating together is also very conducive to conversation which opens up many areas of a person’s life that may not be opened in other activities.

You can assist the person in asking others out for meals or can invite them to share a meal. Hopefully, this will in turn, be reciprocated back to the person.

Educating and Encouraging Group Members

An important component that may greatly contribute to the success of connecting is the education and encouragement of the group members. If you can get the group members behind what you are trying to do, it will greatly increase the chances of success. When people believe in a cause and can envision the benefits, they can “change the world.” Change begins with one person who imparts their vision onto others.

Again, apply the 80/20 principle to the group members who are most responsive. Encourage the group members and thank them when they begin to show a commitment to the individual that is being guided out of social isolation. Verbally expressing thanks and sending thank you cards are appropriate.

The Bruised Tongue Syndrome

Sometimes, when supporting individuals, we need to have enough faith that the community can handle situations without our intervention. We have to bite our tongue because we are so used to jumping in to intervene, explain a person’s behavior, or apologize for people’s inappropriate behavior. Give the community a chance to deal with these things if they occur and see what happens.

One individual was taking an art class with her Social Guide. The class was focused on cartoon art. On the first day of class, the individual with the disability, in front of the class, asked the

instructor if she could model nude. It would have been very easy for the Social Guide to jump in or try to hush up the person. Instead, she bit her tongue and the instructor handled it quite nicely. He simply told her he appreciated her offer but they would not be drawing nudes in this class, but there may be an opportunity for her in a different class. The class then continued. In fact, it may have even helped the situation because the ice was broken and it loosened everyone up.

Fading out and Following Up

After relationships are beginning to develop, the Social Guide will begin to fade out as the need for support decreases.

You have to find a balance because you do not want to fade out too soon but, at the same time, you do not want to make the person too dependent on your support. At first you will probably be going with the person to act as a support system, but after several weeks or months, you may want to begin giving less physical support. You can still provide emotional support and follow-up by continuing to talk with the person and the group members to see how everything is going. You may have to come back and resume a greater level of support if the need arises after fading out for a period. Each situation is different and all parties involved will have to experiment to see what works best. Keep in mind, the overriding goal is for the community members to take over the support and inclusion of the person in their social circle.

A Final Note

It is my sincerest hope this handbook was helpful and you gained some information to help on your journey of becoming a Social Guide. I would like to leave with you with one last bit of wisdom. I heard these words in a sermon and they have made a great difference in my life:

1. Care more than others think you ought to
2. Risk more than others think is wise
3. Dream more than others can even imagine
4. Expect more than others think is possible

If you apply these words to your life and interactions with others, wonderful things can happen. I have seen it in my own life and in the lives of others.

Good Luck and Best Wishes!