

Service, Support and Success:

The Direct Support Worker Newsletter

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A Note From The Editors

Service, Support and Success published it's first issue last December. The idea of the newsletter was just forming back then and we had no idea that it would receive the kind of positive feedback that was to come its way. Clearly there is a need for articles written for Direct Support Workers and this newsletter tapped into that need. We have tried, as much as limited resources and limited time has allowed, to create something worth reading, something that would spark discussion, debate and maybe even foster change. As the concept grew from those first articles into the newsletter, we decided that we'd like this to be an ongoing publication. So, we are about to embark on Volume Two. We've decided to have Volumes run January to December so this first year will have two Decembers, but after this, the calendar will dictate the Volume change. We both thank you for your enthusiastic response to the articles and we pledge to keep bringing your articles that provoke thought and encourage growth. See you next year in Volume Two!

The Gifts of the Season: The Gifts of Service

Dave Hingsburger

Vita Community Living Services

"I can't believe what I've learned just in the past few weeks."

This sentiment was expressed by a young student on placement. She had just finished several weeks working in a residential support role and was completing her evaluation. It struck her that, while she had been taught much about what to expect and what to do, she was unprepared for all the emotional growth that she would be required to undergo just as a result of the role that she was taking on. "I am just a little bit different than when I started," she said, "I've had to think about things and challenge my assumptions."

She's right. Being in the lives of others offers us a unique point of view. Properly experienced, human services offers us the opportunity that few get – to begin to understand life, as lived, and

the importance of even the smallest moment. As it is the holiday, this year-end article is going to look at some of the ‘gifts of service’ that are there, but for the opening, for all of us. This is a very personal list and yours may be very different. But this may serve to get the conversation going.

- 1) Welcome: One of the distinguishing factors about working in human services is that we are, by the nature of the job, drawn into the lives of others. As we have come to understand that our job is to assist someone to live the life they want, not the one we determine for them, we are challenged to expand our understanding of the absolute breadth of the word ‘diversity.’ Typically ‘diversity’ is a word misused. In fact many people instinctively define it in a way that limits diversity – which is exactly the thing the word tries to avoid – to race, or to religion, or to sexuality. Diversity is so much bigger than that. Diversity, in those terms, is something that can be easily operationalized and have goals set – the elimination of prejudicial treatment. As important as that is, it is diversity, in small moments, that is often more challenging. One neighbour who eats eggs for breakfast every morning is frowned upon by another neighbour who has toast and tea. We are brought up with our own rituals and our own ideas of what is right and wrong. I was brought up by a mother who thought it shocking and appalling if men wore hats inside. I, now, even sixty years later, think it’s unmannerly to see hats on the heads of young men. I am now immune to the shock of it but I notice it every single time. Learning to ‘welcome’ people’s habits, personal peccadillos and individual eccentricities can be extraordinarily difficult. Seeing someone leave their dishes in the sink to be done in the morning when you know, IN YOUR SOUL, that they should be done before bed and still managing to keep your mouth shut is progress. Seeing those dishes and not caring because they aren’t your dishes and this isn’t your apartment and it isn’t your life is the goal. “Welcome is the polar opposite of prejudice.” We can, should we choose to, use the opportunity of service to broaden who we are and begin to relax into a world where we have no need to control others which will benefit us in our lives. It will make us into kinder, gentler people. Moreover, welcoming diversity in the small things makes welcoming diversity, in general, that much easier. The ability to really provide ‘welcome’ to others is an incredible gift.
- 2) Patience: Ah, there is the stereotype isn’t there? We are such patient people. We must be. We are told constantly. Whenever I tell people what I do others always say, ‘You must be so patient.’ Oh. How. Wrong. They. Are. But, even so, that’s not the patience I’m talking about here. Perhaps the better way to express what I mean is to substitute the phrase, ‘the art of stillness’ in place of the word ‘patience. We live in a world where everyone is rushing, everyone is multitasking. Walking and talking on the phone while silently indicating to the clerk for two sugars not one and that embarrassing gesture made to communicate that milk is needed – that’s the stuff of modern life. In order to be really good at supporting someone, the ability, the incredible skill of stillness or ‘patience’ is

required. Most often 'patience' is seen as someone standing, obviously put out, obviously being made to wait, obviously checking a watch, obviously tapping fingers while someone struggles under the pressure of another's patience to put lunch in a bag or get the zipper to zip properly. Stillness, the ability to just be while another just does, is a very different thing. Stillness gives room, stillness gives support without words, stillness is what happens when two people share space, equally, without words spoken. The ability to be 'still' with another person allows a relationship the space to grow. This is something that can make us into better friends, better spouses and better parents.

- 3) Creativity: Support workers who can't draw to save their lives, whose voice draws blood from the lyrics of a song, who really should dance when there's nobody watching can be the most incredibly creative people alive. There is an art to living with a disability. A real art. Good support people are artists. They see a barrier as something that doesn't forbid, but rather, as something that will be gotten around somehow. "Will" and "determination" are good things, but without creativity "will" can be frustrated and "determination" can flag. Creativity looks for other ways to accomplish goals. This creativity comes from being genuinely interested in helping someone to get what they want from their lives. This creativity is something that models the best possible attitude towards living with the myriad barriers that get in the way of someone who has either a physical or intellectual disability. A woman with a disability who has a poor memory generally but can remember words to songs being taught phone numbers by putting them to music – brilliance, art even. A man who loves to walk alone but has difficulty remembering directions being taught how to use a GPS – brilliance, and again, art. Working with people with disabilities and learning to be creative is a huge gift. Life can only be lived with quality when it's also lived with creativity.
- 4) Light Sensitivity: Being served by a media which loves to focus on failure and on human foibles and on famous people messing up, we can develop a negative view of the human condition. Negativity, it has been said, is the hallmark of a twenty-four-hour-news world. Just turning on the news in the morning is enough to set the day off badly. However, on the same day that a movie star gets drunk and spews vile language and a politician gets caught with one hand in the cookie jar and one hand all over his 'executive assistant' – we may get to see someone, who has struggled for years, do up the zipper of her coat for the first time. Good staff, who have learned to see success, who have trained themselves to look for the good within the struggle, who have the ability to see the light when big success comes from small moments can develop a pattern for living that allows each to look past society's negativity and celebrate the things that matter.
- 5) Courage: As the self advocate movement has made plain, our job is not to advocate for someone but to help them advocate for themselves. The exciting job of teaching people

with disabilities that they have a voice and that their voice deserves to be heard, has a wonderful side effect. The implication is that we all have voices and we all have voices that need to be heard. One staff, who had only worked in self advocacy for a very short while said, “I can’t believe how much I’ve changed, I now speak up when I need to, I don’t let people simply walk all over me anymore. I am truly changed.” Self advocacy has become a term that is related specifically to disability but, in fact, it’s something that we can all practice. Speaking up takes courage and courage comes with practice.

- 6) Social Justice Junkies: “I used to be silent when my friends used the R word, now none of them would dare say it around me.” “I used to just laugh along when someone told a racist joke, but now I tell them that I don’t like that kind of humour.” “I used to let someone make jokes about the people I serve, but I stop them in their tracks now.” There is something that happens to all who work with people who have disabilities – they come to recognize people with disabilities as people, and more than that, an oppressed people who suffer discrimination and verbal abuse constantly. From the language used to describe them, “Ret*rded,” “Speds,” “Mongs,” to the jokes made about who they are, people with disabilities face all sorts of social violence by people who expect no challenge, as if there is a social agreement that this is OK. The longer you work with people with disabilities the less comfortable you become with silence around these kinds of words and those kinds of attitudes. Suddenly to see the connection to all forms of oppression, name calling is wrong, no matter who it’s done towards or what group is being attacked. It takes courage, but we’ve covered that, but it feels good to know that your silence no longer is part of the problem.
- 7) Self Awareness: I never thought, when I first started working in a group home that one day I’d be sitting in a meeting talking with fifteen group home staff about masturbation and what kind of dildos are the safest to recommend. Nor did I ever think that I’d be with a group discussing any of the following: why snuggling an adult man between your breasts is a reinforcer for temper tantrums; whether being spat at or struck is more upsetting and of course, fecal smearing and the right to self expression. As we work in the domain of humanity, we are forced to examine the human experience. We ask questions at work that no other profession asks: what’s the definition of excessive masturbation – would six be too often in a day? From these questions, from these discussions, we have the opportunity to put ourselves under scrutiny; what do we really believe about things, how well do we know our own attitudes and our own limits? Working in human services means that, every year, every staff will be confronted with new questions and, as a result, have a constant opportunity to grow and change. Used properly, working in the life of another requires that we work in our own life. Cool!

- 8) Humility: You teach: they achieve. You facilitate: they do. You make possible: they do the impossible. Coming to see, and value, your role in working with people with disabilities can lead to excitement and, in that excitement, we can engage in the accidental theft of the accomplishments of those we serve. This is a natural mistake made early on in our work with people with disabilities. Over time, with growth and self awareness, the dawning realization that people learn because they allow us to teach, that people achieve because they allow us to support and that people do the impossible when they allow themselves to take chances. All of these things are important and all of them involve the deepest kind of trust between those who receive service and those who offer it. Coming to see that people feel safe to learn or to try with us as the biggest compliment we can get as a service provider we can begin to transfer an individual's success from our hands into their own. Speaking with a woman who works with people with significant disabilities who was recounting teaching someone to feed himself for the first time, she said, "I teach, and that's important but he *learns* and that's what matters." This is not false modesty, this is realizing that our role is hugely important, but it's never more important that the result of what we do – recognizing that someone else's success is their own does not mean that we don't acknowledge our own success. We just put ourselves where we belong, in the background of a successful and happy life.
- 9) Humour: If you don't have one, you'll get one, and if you can't, you won't make it a week! Learning to laugh at the situations you find yourself in is a gift that, literally, keeps on giving. Human services don't allow you to stand, an arm's length away, from real life. The things we have to talk about are things that people often avoid talking about. The things we discover about ourselves are things that some people never even go looking for. And, looked at properly, a lot of it is just plain funny. More than that, the stereotype of people with disabilities is that they live lives of quiet tragedy. Not true. Some of the wickedly funniest people I have ever met have disabilities – physical, intellectual, both. One of the loveliest sights to be seen is when a care provider and a care recipient are sitting together laughing. In joy there is no hierarchy. In laughter no divisions.
- 10) A Sense of Proportion: This morning I saw a woman become really upset because the hotel restaurant had, temporarily, run out of lids for coffee cups. She would be required to wait for five minutes for someone to go get more. She became angry. She blustered on and on and on about this 'not being the service I expect' and 'this is just not acceptable.' The poor waitress kept apologizing and apologizing and apologizing, you'd have thought she'd accidentally cut off the customer's arm. This is not a problem. People, who work in human services, develop a real sense of proportion. Knowing what is and what is not a problem saves so much stress and so much grief. This one was saved for last because it's probably one of the least spoken about, but most important, of the gifts we get from doing

what we do. Seeing inconvenience as an inconvenience not as anything more is a lost art in these days of self-importance and self-involvement.

Well, that's it. The goal of this article was to unwrap the gifts we get from the work we do. Human services involve work that requires growth, requires the receiving of gifts – even unwanted ones – from the work we do. At the end of every year, if we all discovered that something that happened over the year has changed us, has made us think about who we are, how we are and where we are, then we have grown. It's part and parcel of the sheer joy of being paid to be part of the lives of other people. Being paid to be there at the big moments and the small moments that make up life. Being paid to simply 'be' with another 'being.' Over the course of this next year, remember to open the gifts that you are given.

Letter to the Editor:

I am a support staff with Open Hands, and would like to make a brief comment on the Boundaries paper I just finished reading.

I have read your review on boundaries, and found that for the most part it was consistent and well written. There was only one part that I felt uncomfortable with and have a suggestion that might make it a little easier, in case others might feel the same way. This section is part of the compliments. Where it was written to say

“I would rather not hear that from you.” I felt uncomfortable with the thought of actually saying that. If I complimented someone, and they said that to me, I think I might feel a little hurt that something that could be meant as a nice gesture is being so blatantly rejected. I was wondering instead if there's some way of saying, “it's nice to hear compliments, but maybe one of your housemates might like to hear something nice instead” this way, it's more of a redirection in the right area without telling the individual that complimenting is wrong. Since we are being told that we teach them many of their social skills, maybe this could work to make them feel complimenting is ok, when directed to the right people? This is just a thought. Thank you very much for taking the time to read this.

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Service Support and Success welcomes submissions. Contact the editors for an author's guide or to discuss possible ideas for publication.. dhingsburger@vitacls.org or anethercott@handstfhn.ca
