

COMMUNITY BUILDING MADE SIMPLE

By Jan Lampman
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I remember the first time that I tried to help someone with an intellectual disability get involved in a community activity. The person said that he wanted to be involved in car racing. Well, there is a motor speedway near our city, so I volunteered to take him to the races on Friday nights in hopes that he could somehow become involved in the race scene. I knew that there were people who always went, they tailgated before the races, got to know the drivers, hung out in the pit and went out after the races together. This is what the guy I was supporting wanted.

So, we just showed up at the races, week after week. In those days I was a little shy, so talking to strangers was out of the question. The person I supported was not shy, but he used a wheelchair, wore a helmet and sometimes had major seizures during a race. He once even stopped breathing briefly and we had to go off in the ambulance. I must mention that did not endear us to the raceway faithful. The few people who did sit near us on a regular basis found new seats the next time we arrived.

John and I went to the races almost every single Friday night of the season for three straight seasons and John never got invited to a tailgate party, never went to the pit, never spoke to a driver or went out with folks after a race. In three years, I did get more able to talk with people, but really what happened is that at first folks were nervous because John looked and acted different from them, then they got sort of frightened about his medical situation and finally they saw that I was very competent and comfortable with John. They saw that John seemed to enjoy being with me. They really saw no role that they could play in John's life. So, they left John to me, the caring professional – the angel (someone actually called me that).

I was too green (and maybe too vain) to correct that assumption that I was an angel and had no idea about how to re-introduce John to people in a way that would encourage new relationships to form. So, as a result John had some fun times at the Auburn Speedway, but never made one single friend and never got to fulfill the dream of hanging out in the pit, talking to drivers.

Luckily 10 years later, my friend Andrew gave me another chance to help someone get connected. Andrew also has significant disabilities. He loves drumming and was taken with the Chinese drummers that are part of a local Kung Fu School. I, too, am interested in Martial Arts, so I agreed to help Andrew get connected. This time, however, I did some legwork first. I visited a few different martial arts schools, looking for a place that seemed to be sort of informal and friendly. Once I found the perfect combination of the drumming and low key, friendly atmosphere. I approached the teacher of the school to ask if he welcomed anyone. He said yes, of course. I then brought Andrew in for a visit. Andrew, the teacher and I talked about the fact that Andrew would probably never learn the techniques in a way that would advance him through the ranking system, but that he could benefit from the interaction with other students and that he could certainly gain self confidence and benefit from the philosophy of the system.

The teacher welcomed Andrew into the class, in large part because Andrew had a check made out to the School for the first three months. However, Andrew soon began making friends in the class. Before long, everyone looked for Andrew and students were disappointed when I came without him. After about four months, there was a big tournament. The school needed volunteers with trucks to help haul the equipment to the tournament site. Guess who had a truck and driver at his disposal? Andrew. So now Andrew had something to offer. He became the official "driver" for parades, the tournament and any other event that required a truck.

Andrew as it turned out had something else to offer to a few of the young martial artists who were looking for a job. He had employment. Andrew needs someone to help him most of the time, so when a student at the school was looking for a job at the same time that one of Andrew's helpers was leaving to attend college in another town, Andrew was able to offer employment to his fellow student.

One day after about two years at the school, there was a full class of students and only two teachers on the floor. A potential student came in to check out the school, but both instructors were engaged with students. Historically, when this happened, the school often lost the prospect. On this day, however, Andrew saw the person walk in and decided to help out. He walked off the floor and began chatting with the potential student. Andrew does not always communicate very clearly, but could be heard telling the prospect the following: "So you want to take kung fu. This is the best style and the best school. You will be an excellent student." The prospect hung around talking with

Andrew until a teacher could go over and welcome the person. The school did not lose that prospect. On that day, Andrew's new role as official welcomer was born.

That was 10 years ago. As with many things in life, the culture of the school has changed. The teacher had a stroke, many of the students moved on in their lives. Andrew has also moved on. He has developed other interests. However, he still has a few very close friends that he made at the school. He is still remembered and respected by many people he met at the school. The confidence that Andrew gained from the martial arts education has also stayed with him. His life is richer for the experiences that he had at the school.

What I have definitely learned is that there is a difference between being present in community and participating in community. My friend John was present at the car races twenty years ago, but he did not really participate. He did not make friends, he did not contribute, and he did not achieve the goal that he had to be part of the race culture. Andrew, on the other hand, was a participant. He contributed. He made friends. He learned new skills and developed new confidence.

A lot of what we do in human services is closer to what I did with John. We provide some opportunity to be present in community, but we fall short of supporting and facilitating participation. It is easy to be present. You just go. If someone wants to join a health club, they just go and pay the money and join. If, however, someone wants to be part of a team of power lifters or hang out with the body builders after workouts, then there is more effort needed. We cannot expect someone who has an intellectual disability or other barrier to communication to just go to the place and automatically be included by others and have the opportunity to become a participating, contributing member of the group. Sometimes it takes some legwork to find the most friendly, welcoming place. Sometimes it takes someone to go there first and check it out. It may be necessary to identify some barriers and find a way to get around them. It may, as much as I hate so say it, be necessary to talk to people to help them understand that the person with a disability can participate and contribute. The person may need some kind of support to allow for participation.

I have seen many different programs across the country that have the desired or stated outcome of helping people be part of their community. Most of those programs really help people be present, but not really participate or contribute.

In the cases where presence has morphed into participation and contribution there are a few common elements:

- The group of people or place where the person has gone to seek inclusion has a culture of hospitality to all
- There are one or two people involved already in the activity who sort of take a leadership role in maintaining the welcoming, friendly atmosphere
- There is a helper (circle member, staff, etc) who helps the person with a disability identify the place and people who are the welcomers and helps get them connected
- The helper usually turns out to be someone who is either also passionate about the activity or group that the person with a disability wants to join or is one of those people who knows everyone in the community and is good at connecting all kinds of people

In cases where the goal of connecting does not happen there are also some common elements:

- For whatever reason the place or group is not open to new members
- The group or place identifies the helper as the person as an expert who should deal with any issue or interaction related to the person with a disability
- The helper is not really interested in the group or activity
- The helper is not well connected to his or her community and therefore has difficulty connecting someone else.

I have been working with people with developmental disabilities for over 20 years and still it is challenging for people to find a place where they belong. People that have developmental disabilities are still lonely and not connected to the heart of their communities. It is hard work to help a community see a population of people who have historically been on the margins or even further away from community. It is not as simple as showing up. It is important to be thoughtful and mindful as we try to help individuals who need our help get connected to the things that are important in this life – people, people, people.

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