

## A BRITISH COLUMBIAN LEGACY

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Beginning in November, 1988, a few citizens in two British Columbian cities were contacted and invited to offer the hospitality of their communities to people who had been isolated because of a label — "developmentally disabled."

This citizen initiative was begun in Prince George and Powell River. It was initially sponsored by the British Columbian Association for Community Living, AIMHI of Prince George and the Powell River Association for Community Living.

I was given responsibility for beginning the enterprise and guiding its development for the first two years. During this time, I visited each city for approximately one day each month. In September, 1990 I concluded my monthly visits with the conviction that citizens in each city were involved in creative, ground breaking efforts to include isolated, labelled people in the organizations, clubs, associations, groups, families and enterprises of their cities.

As I conclude my active participation, I thought it might be useful to record the principles that guided my effort. In a sense, these principles are a legacy. I hope they will be helpful to those who are now involved in shaping the future work of the citizens.

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

1. *Isolation from community life is the worst disability.*  
People who have labels like developmentally disabled, mentally retarded, physically disabled, etc., are usually most disabled because of the effects of their isolation from the life of their community.
2. *Every person has gifts to contribute to the community.*  
No matter what label people may have, they have gifts, abilities, talents and skills to contribute to their community and its people.
3. *Communities grow stronger when all people can contribute.*  
As labelled people contribute their talents, the power of the community grows and the disability of isolation diminishes.

4. *A special citizen effort is necessary to open community life to isolated people.*

If the community is to be strengthened and the disability of isolation eliminated, some special citizens will initially need to reach out and open the doors to community, guiding the labelled people to places where they can contribute their gifts.

5. *Isolated people need to be introduced to groups in the community.*

Community is about the relationships of groups of people. These groups come together in clubs, association, organizations, businesses, neighborhood groups and families. As isolated people are introduced to these groups and offer their gifts, they will find individual friends. While we cannot find a friend for another person, we can introduce people to groups where they can meet many others and find that special relationship called friendship.

6. *Well connected citizens are the most effective community guides.*

If isolated, labelled people are to be introduced to community groups, the most effective guides will usually be people who are well known and respected and active in civic life. They are people who know the many paths into community life because they have walked that way themselves.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL GUIDELINES**

In order to give life to these principles, some form of local citizen organization needs to be created. While there is no "correct" form of organization, based upon our experience in British Columbia there are several useful organizational guidelines that emerged:

1. *The organization should be designed to create many citizen guides and hosts.*

The primary purpose of the group is to involve an ever-expanding number of citizens in opening community doors to isolated people. These citizens can either guide labelled people to community groups or they can act as a

host in a group, of which they are a member, to introduce the new person to others in the group.

2. *The organization's leadership should be made up of citizens who are personally involved as guides and hosts.*

Traditionally, a "board" might involve interested but non-participating citizens whose job is to make policy to guide a staff. This form of organization is inappropriate for this effort. It will fail because of the very nature of its membership. Because creating citizen guides and hosts is the very purpose of the group, it needs citizens with guiding and hosting experience at its center. These connected citizens, based upon their personal experience, are the most effective "recruiters" of new participants. They are not asking others to do what they have not done. Rather, they are involving new citizens and then encouraging those citizens to involve others. The approach here is more like a growing self-help group than the usual agency or staffed non-profit group.

3. *The organization's staff should be very small with limited and specific functions.*

No hired staff can equal the hundreds of community connections and relationships of a group of well connected citizens. Therefore, the staff should be clearly defined as a person who *supports* the citizen guides in *their* efforts. If the organization is effective, the clearest proof will be that the number of citizen guides and hosts has multiplied while the staff has remained small. A sign of a failing group is a growing staff and stable or declining citizen participation. We should remember that some of the most effective community groups, involving hundreds of thousands of citizens, have tiny staff groups. Examples are Alcoholics Anonymous, Rotary, La Leche League.

Nonetheless, a staff person can be very important in functions such as urging citizens on, performing administrative responsibilities, working on transportation problems for isolated people, and locating isolated people who are looking for community opportunity.

The leadership of the group should decide whether they need a staff person. It may not be necessary in some or many cases. A volunteer

citizen staff might be found. If a staff person is needed, the citizen leadership should select that person.

4. *The organization should establish its public identity as a group of citizens personally involved in building a stronger community.*

Our past experience indicates that successful efforts that involve many citizens require a unique public identity. This identity is focused on:

- citizen action
- community building
- hospitality
- needed gifts and talents

This identity is threatened if the organization's identity is associated with a human service system or agency. The reason is that a human service system is about:

- professional service
- system building
- paid care
- problems and deficiencies

Therefore, a special effort is necessary to use the language and methods of citizen groups and to *avoid* the language and methods of agencies and services.

Our success *depends* upon convincing citizens that *they* are the experts about community groups. And that if they don't act to open the doors, no professional will, or can.

5. *If funding is necessary, it should be free of human service agency demands.*

Because this effort is a new and unique citizen effort, there is no precedent for funding the work. In many situations, local human service agencies may be willing to provide funding. There are three great risks from this funding source.

First, the agency may want to be identified as the sponsor of the activity. However, it is an agency that labels people. Our task is to help people escape their labels and be known first as contributing citizens - Mary, Sam and Jane. The very name of an agency contradicts this understanding for it labels people as clients and consumers.

Second, the service agency may want one of its professionals to staff the effort. This would put a person experienced in service methods inappropriately at the center of a process that depends on citizen methods and approaches.

Third, professional service systems are designed to facilitate professional-client relationships. While these relationships are useful in many circumstances, they are contradictory to this work that depends upon citizen-to-citizen relationships. Most human service funders will require those involved in this citizen work to accept forms of reporting and acting that are useful for professionals and clients but will insure the failure of an authentic citizen effort.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

While I was visiting Prince George and Powell River there were several possibilities that we did not actively pursue because of the priorities of getting started. However, as the local efforts develop, I hope the three following possibilities can be pursued.

1. *Seeking affiliation with a local citizen association.*

The surest way to create an identity as a citizen organization would be to associate with a recognized citizen organization. This association could also result in non-service funding support and provide for more continuity. Potential groups we have specifically discussed as possible sponsors include service clubs (Rotary, Kiwanis, etc.), the Association of University Women, and the Chamber of Commerce. A critical factor in affiliation could be whether many of the members of the group could be involved as guides or hosts. In this way we would gain committed and growing support for the effort within the organization.

2. *Exploring new living opportunities for labelled people who have established new community relationships.*

As we introduce more and more people into more varied community relationships, their residential placement in small institutions called group homes will become inappropriate. As their lives, talents and gifts become woven into the social and business fabric of the community, they will still be physically isolated in residences focused on their disability with primary relationships with other disabled people.

It is our experience that as labelled people gain more community experiences and relationships, their desire for a living place in the community grows. Therefore, it may be useful, in the future, for some of the citizen leaders to explore methods to secure funding that will allow the labelled citizens who are newly involved in the community an opportunity to find a residence that reflects their new relationships. In this effort, the guides and hosts of the person could join in arranging or hosting the new residence.

3. *Connecting with local self-help groups of labelled people.*

In Canada there is a very important self-help group of people who have been labelled developmentally disabled. Its' name is People First. Whenever I have gone to British Columbia, I have made a special effort to meet with the People First leadership, tell them of my activities and seek their advice and counsel.

It seems to me that this relationship should be developed and maintained by some leadership people wherever this activity occurs. I have found the members of People First supportive and very helpful in identifying isolated people, identifying gifts and talents, and describing community groups that would be good to contact. In addition, some members of People First have indicated an interest in serving as guides or members of the leadership.

## CAUTIONS

For several years I have been involved with efforts in three communities to activate citizen initiatives to open community life to isolated people. Most of all, I am

impressed by the unique creativity of these efforts as the citizen leaders invent new ways of strengthening community life. Along the way, there have been a few dead ends and barriers. It may be useful to learn from those negative experiences by suggesting a few cautions.

1. *This work is not about charity.*

It *is* about citizens introducing the gifts of isolated citizens to the hospitality of community groups. Everyone contributes. Everyone is a person with gifts and dignity.

If we should seek charity and evoke pity, we will degrade the community relationships we seek as citizens and friends.

I regret to say that we have had to be especially careful in our relationships with a few churches and clergy who have tended to distort the relationships we seek by calling for service, charity and pity rather than love, friendship and justice.

2. *This citizen work cannot be translated into a manual or a "cookbook."*

I have constantly been asked how to "replicate" the initiatives with which we have been involved. One approach would be to create a "manual." This would allow various service systems to attempt to "mimic" authentic citizen initiatives, but it would stifle the unique local citizen creativity we have found in each place we've worked.

Instead of "manualizing," "systematizing" or "replicating" the local efforts, we propose an alternative process of stimulating unique initiatives. This method involves inviting citizens in an interested community to visit the citizens who have already created a community building effort, and to learn on site. In this way, a *mentoring relationship* can be established and new inventions stimulated. I am especially interested in working with the development of this kind of a mentoring effort in the future. Anyone interested?



3. *This work is not primarily focused on events.*

Our effort is to open doors to *community* life. Community is expressed through relationships with many people. Therefore, the primary focus of this effort is to introduce isolated people to *groups* of people in community life - from families to clubs to enterprises to associations to business places, etc.

Some citizens have gotten off the track by focusing on taking people to events. A person can be taken to a movie, game or other popular event and never make any new relationships. Taking people to events is the way most human service professionals create a substitute for community relationships. The unique capacity of citizen guides is to *connect isolated people to groups of other people*. If an event is an entry to new *people* relationships, it is perfect. If it is an activity that doesn't create opportunities for new relationships, it obviously is not community building.

4. *This work is not primarily focused on one-to-one relationships.*

A close friendship is priceless and preferred. However, most of our real friendships evolve and are not created by someone else. Therefore, our primary effort is to engage isolated people with as many people as possible so that natural one-to-one friendships can evolve and flourish. For this reason, we are not asking staff or guides to primarily "create a friendship." Rather we are seeking to provide opportunities for *many* relationships so that friendships can grow from the hearts of individual people.

5. *This work will fail if it grows up as a human service outreach effort.*

For all the reasons described earlier, it cannot be overemphasized that citizens must define and control this work and its direction. To succeed, it must be free of the methods and labels of the human service system.

6. *This work will fail if it comes to be primarily a staff responsibility.*

Even a citizen initiative that is free of the service system will fail if the work is increasingly seen as a staff function. Because we are primarily about

multiplying community relationships, many citizens rich in community connections are the necessary path to involvement. No matter how connected the staff person(s), they can never equal the relationships of a group of well connected citizens. And at worst, staff can lead concerned citizens to not act as guides because the citizens believe the staff is doing the work.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

I have learned a great deal from the citizens who have joined in this adventure in British Columbia. They have taught me that this work is not primarily about disabled people. Rather, it is about *welcoming* newcomers to the excitement, friendliness and opportunity in our community. It is about expanding the *diversity* of the community by including all the special gifts that human beings have to offer each other. It is about following the habits of the *heart* to the center of community life.

As we welcome diversity, the heart of the community grows strong. And we will eventually create a community so powerful that it can be said, "There are no strangers here."