

Great Ideas

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

With all the problems facing us today—globally, across many nations, and in our personal lives—great ideas are required to solve big issues. And despite all the doom and gloom, little by little, and one way or another, we chip away at the difficulties. In some instances, “traditional” solutions no longer work, and innovative, non-traditional ideas emerge, often from unlikely sources.

“Let’s give it a try!” “Why not?” “What we’ve been doing isn’t working so great, so let’s do something else.” These and similar sentiments are the rallying cry in many quarters.

Everything written above applies to the issues facing people with disabilities! And is it possible some Great Ideas can come from people with disabilities, themselves?

Years ago, I was a board member of a “community-centered board” (CCB), a regional arm of our state’s human services department, which provides supports and services for people with developmental disabilities. Our board held a jobs summit: local employment providers met with board members, with many interesting and provocative discussions among the 25-or-so people in attendance. Everyone was expected to participate and share their ideas and perspectives, including people with disabilities (like “Nancy”), another board member. Nancy was middle-aged (like me), and she had a cognitive disability (some would say Nancy had a “low IQ”).

During one discussion by providers about the difficulties of “getting jobs” for people with disabilities, Nancy spoke up and said, “Well, the best jobs I ever had were the ones I got for myself.” Wow—what a powerful statement! But there was no reaction or response—*none*—from the employment professionals or other board members. The conversation went on as if Nancy hadn’t spoken! I was stunned; here was a person with a disability with a valuable perspective and she was ignored. I spoke up and asked, “Did anyone hear what Nancy said?” My question was met with a variety of looks (not all of them friendly), and I asked Nancy to repeat her statement. She did, and the discussion then turned in that direction (although it seemed that some people were still reluctant to value

Nancy’s experiences). The end result? Some in attendance agreed to focus more on helping people with disabilities get their own jobs, instead of getting jobs for them (and generating more dependency).

In many areas across the country, human services (including special education) are in dire straits. Many tend to think the only solution is “increased funding” or at least “no budget cuts.” But when lack of funding *wasn’t* a problem, we still faced many difficult issues. So why don’t we get busy thinking about other solutions? And who better to ask than children and adults with disabilities, their families, and/or others who care about them? When my son was younger, he attended a wonderfully inclusive elementary school, and some of the best solutions to dilemmas regarding curriculum, modifications, and other issues came from his classmates. At other times, the perspectives and experiences of adults with disabilities helped us make better choices about Benjamin’s life. And perhaps most importantly, our son has come up with Great Ideas that others (including my husband and me) hadn’t considered.

What if we all decided to have a Great Ideas Summit in our homes, our schools, our agencies, and/or other places? What if people with disabilities were asked for their ideas, and what if they were really listened to? (Why is it that we don’t listen very well to children and adults with disabilities? We can do better, can’t we?)

What if “team meetings” to write plans/programs (IEP, IHP, ISP, etc.) always included opportunities for people with disabilities and those who care about them (friends, family, etc.) to share their Great Ideas? We could brainstorm together and let the ideas flow. And it’s important to listen to *all* ideas, even if they seem wacky, not realistic, or whatever, for *those* ideas can generate other ideas that could get us out of the box we’re in!

Let’s shake off the doldrums, set aside our fears, and get excited about the possibilities when we listen to and value the Great Ideas of children and adults with disabilities, their families, and their friends. Imagine the possibilities!