

Mining Our Natural Resources

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

Miners, searching for gold, diamonds, and other hidden treasures, use a variety of tools in their quest. And success comes through patience, perseverance, and hard work. We can follow in their footsteps, and mine the natural resources in our communities, in our quest to ensure people with disabilities are included in all areas of life.

Before going further, however, we need to address the READINESS issue. Too many of us say we're waiting for either the community or the person with a disability to be "ready." Well, our communities *and* individuals with disabilities *are* READY! What do we really mean by READY? And who set the standards on READINESS—are they written down somewhere, carved in stone?

Consider this: during the tumultuous '60s, was being READY a requirement prior to the integration of African-American children and adults in schools, workplaces, and other locations? No. There were, however, some who begged the Federal government: "Give us time to get ready," and the reply was a resounding, "No!" Integration was achieved by simply doing it. The same can be true in the disability arena.

Now, back to mining our natural resources and finding the gold in our own back yards! The treasures in our communities may not glitter like rare gems, but their value is immeasurable. And while many of these treasures may be hidden (because they don't have store fronts), others (*with* store fronts) are right before our eyes—we just haven't seen them for what they're worth.

You probably drive by some of the latter every day on your way to work or school, or while running errands. Some examples include: the YMCA, library, museum, park and rec, health clubs, churches, colleges/universities, and more. Examples of hidden treasures (those *without* store fronts) include a wide

variety of social and hobby clubs and organizations, such as: service clubs (Kiwanis, Lions, etc.), hobby clubs (model train, French, horses, scrapbooking, etc.), Scouts, and many, many more. These groups may meet in people's homes, churches, or other "borrowed" locations, with no neon signs to advertise their presence. To find them, you'll need to do a little sleuthing: check the Yellow Pages; contact your Better Business Bureau/Visitor's Center; and/or call churches and affiliated entities. For example, to find groups focused on crafts, call or visit fabric, hobby, and/or home improvement stores. Your local newspaper most likely publishes a regular calendar of meetings of social, hobby, or volunteer groups; read that section of the paper every day and begin compiling a list. Visit www.meetup.com to see what's happening in your community.

When gathering information about your community's treasures, stay very open-minded! For example, if you believe the person with a disability in your life might be interested in gardening, don't focus *only* on entities related to gardening, or you might miss other important gems. "Melissa" might like gardening, but may not want to join a gardening group. She may, however, be interested in exploring other activities which she currently has no experience with. Keep the options open when mapping all the natural resources in your community!

Assembling a list of your community's natural resources can be done in many ways. Service providers or members of a parent organization can (1) list the entities they pass on their way to work; (2) divide the community geographically and each take an area; (3) scan the Yellow Pages or other resources; and/or (4) find potential treasures in a variety of other ways. We can work alone to create our own lists, or work cooperatively with others and come up with a greater list. Two or three people can combine their lists and share the info with many others.

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What can you do once you have a list of your community's natural resources? The sky's the limit!

Kids with disabilities who have been isolated in special settings can be included in park and rec activities, take classes at a museum or library, join Scouts or other youth groups, and more. In the process, they'll make new friends and experience ordinary, inclusive activities. Adults with disabilities can do the same, and can also join hobby, social, or volunteer organizations and be with others who share a common interest. Provider agencies who are connecting the people they serve with community activities are seeing outstanding results: individuals with disabilities are increasing the number of connections with "real people" in the real world, which leads to friendships, real employment (new friends are conduits to jobs), a new place to live, and much more!

Fear seems to be one of the primary reasons we haven't made greater efforts toward and greater progress in community inclusion. Fear the person with a disability will fail, fear others will be cruel, fear someone will say no, and more. All of these things *may* happen, and if they do, we must continue trying. (*Always remember that "no" doesn't mean "never"!*) In general, however, the brave souls who have taken this leap of faith have learned we haven't given enough credit to individuals with disabilities, *or* to our communities.

Here's an example from my son's life that may help motivate you to move beyond your fears. When Benjamin was in his early teens, he was enrolled in his second year of drama classes at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. During the first year, his Dad (Mark) went with him to the weekly classes, carrying our seven-foot ramps in the car so Benj could get up on the stage in his wheelchair, and Mark "lurked"—staying close by in case Benj needed anything, but *not* sitting right next to him during lessons and rehearsals (not cool!). During this first year, the instructors had learned about the accommodations Benj needed (which included scripts in large print), and everything worked out fine.

Prior to the second year, Benj decided he didn't want Dad anywhere close to the class! "Set up the ramps to the stage, Dad, and then leave—really leave—and pick me up when it's over," he insisted. Mark complied, figuring Benj had been successful during the previous year's class, the instructors knew about accommodations, and things would somehow be okay. Still, we were nervous—Mark called me on the cell phone to report this new development—it's hard to cut those apron strings!

When Benj and his Dad arrived home that day, I asked Benj how it went. He reported that the first thing on the instructor's agenda was for all the students

to complete a questionnaire. *Eeek!* Benjamin does all his writing on the computer, not with a pencil! My mind was whirring, and in a split second, I wondered if it had been an unsettling experience. Was Benjamin embarrassed that he

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couldn't fill out the questionnaire? Was this an awful beginning to the class? But I said nothing and instead asked, "What happened then?" "Well," he began, "when the teacher passed out the questionnaire, I looked around the class and saw this really cute girl and I told her I couldn't write with a pencil and asked if she would fill out my questionnaire for me. So she did." Then Benj shared the other wonderful details of that day's class.

Benj handled the situation. And others did for our son what Mark or I would have done. *It was not a big deal!* Moreover, if Mark or I *had* been there, our presence would have prevented Benjamin from asking for help from the "cute girl." That one small experience had huge outcomes, in that everyone learned Benj could speak for himself (he didn't need a parent or an assigned helper) *and* his classmates and instructor learned that *anyone* in the class was capable of helping.

This leads us to some basic ground rules for successful inclusion in the community. Don't call ahead and ask, "Do you take people with disabilities?" Would you ask, "Do you take Native-Americans [or

any other identified group]?” No! Instead, simply call or go by to acquire general information. Calling ahead and talking about a person’s disability and all his “problems” can scare others and lead to an unsuccessful outcome.

When possible and if appropriate, the person with a disability can visit the activity as an observer to learn more about it (especially if tuition or costs are involved). During this “reconnaissance”—and during the “real thing”—why not let an adult and/or older child go it alone? Yes, it might be scary, but great things are possible! When a companion (you or someone else) is along, it’s likely the person with a disability may be viewed as “unable” (especially if the companion does all the talking). If it seems absolutely necessary to accompany the person, let him take the lead as you become as invisible as possible! Also, if necessary, role-play or practice the visit ahead of time.

Once it’s been decided that a person would like to participate in a community activity, determine what accommodations or supports the person needs to be successful. *After* paying the tuition and/or signing up for the activity, inform the activity’s leader about these supports/accommodations, especially if these may be provided by the activity. And the child/adult with a disability can take the lead on this, to the greatest extent possible. (But if the activity does not provide the needed accommodations, don’t let this torpedo the whole thing! Don’t fight about it; provide the accommodations yourself, if necessary. What’s more important: fighting over who’s responsible for what or making the endeavor a success for the child/adult with a disability?)

Here’s one more example about what can happen when we mine our natural community resources. A provider agency staff member (“Eileen”) contacted a model train club after learning that “John” (a person who receives services) had an interest in model

trains. When she told “Tony,” the president of the club, she was calling on behalf of one her “clients,” Tony asked, “Why are *you* calling?” Tony thought it strange that a person would call on behalf of another! For a moment, Eileen was tongue-tied. Speaking for John was common within the service system—Eileen was never questioned about this routine Disability World practice. But in the *Real World*, people speak for themselves.

After getting information about when and where the club met, Eileen asked if the location was on the bus line (since John didn’t drive). At that point, Tony asked for John’s phone number and address; he would share this with other members who would offer John a ride in the carpool. But—eek—Eileen couldn’t “divulge confidential information.” (This helped Eileen realize she needed to ensure people with disabilities could make these initial calls for themselves—*they* could share this private information!) But Eileen was almost in shock—this welcoming attitude wasn’t the outcome she expected. She had, in fact, thought this whole exercise would be futile, believing the community wouldn’t accept or welcome John!

Eileen took John to the first meeting (and made herself invisible). After that, John *was* able to join the carpool! Then, within a few months of joining the model train club, John’s new friends helped him get a real job in the community. This, in turn, led to him getting his own apartment. Wondrous things happen when people become connected based on shared interests!

One of the most important things we can do is encourage and support children and adults with disabilities learning to speak for themselves so they can lead the lives they want. And mining our natural resources can enable people with disabilities to create connections with the many natural resources in their own backyards. In the process, everyone will become valuable members of their inclusive communities!