

A Wonderful Life

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

In the holiday film classic, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” George Bailey (James Stewart) faces many trials and tribulations that lead to his decision to jump off a bridge and end it all. He believes he’s more valuable to his family dead than alive (via life insurance).

You know the rest of the story: Clarence, Angel Second Class, arrives to show George how different the world would be *if he had never been born*. The lesson takes hold, and by the end of the movie, George realizes what’s really important: family and friends, and the precious experiences with those he loves. There are valuable lessons in this movie for all of us in our everyday lives, as well as some specific to the disability arena.

If you’re employed in the field—as a special ed teacher, therapist (OT, PT, speech, etc.), direct support professional, or something else—if the children and/or adults with disabilities in your life had never been born, you wouldn’t have the job you have today! You might be a newbie, or maybe you’ve been in the field for decades. Either way, your career has enabled you to succeed; allowed you to keep a roof over your head, food on the table, clothes on your back, and more; and helped you to learn from a wide variety of experiences. As a result, you have a wonderful life—thanks in part to people with disabilities. *Have you shown your appreciation lately?*

As an author and public speaker in the field, I realized years ago that I wouldn’t have the job I have without my son, Benjamin. What would I know about disability issues if not for him?

On a larger scale, government agencies, service providers, non-profits, and other entities would not exist without people with disabilities. Do these organizations truly value the people who make their existence possible?

If you’re a parent or family member of a child or adult with disability, you have also enjoyed the privilege of learning from invaluable experiences. (Maybe you’ve ended up with a job in the field, too!) And, yes, raising a child with a disability may require us to do things differently, spend more money, and so forth, but these “extras” pale in comparison to the joys our children give to us. Do we appreciate their contributions to *our* wonderful lives?

Finally, what about *their* lives? Let’s go back to the movie for a moment. Early on, George announced his hopes and dreams: “I’m shakin’ the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I’m gonna see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Colosseum. Then, I’m comin’ back here to go to college and see what they know. And then I’m gonna build things. I’m gonna build airfields, I’m gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high, I’m gonna build bridges a mile long...” Later, his dream was to salvage the wreckage of his “building and loan” company. Ultimately, George realized these things didn’t contribute to his living a wonderful life. It was, instead, his family and friends, and sharing meaningful experiences with them. And George’s family and friends didn’t care about what he did not achieve. They cared about *living life with him*.

What about us? Are we doing what it takes to ensure children and adults with disabilities have those meaningful experiences with family and friends, or are our efforts focused in the wrong direction?

Many people own a wonderful life, thanks in part to people with disabilities, whose lives touch so many and make such a difference. If they weren’t around, as Clarence said, it would leave an “awful hole.”

We know what’s really important, don’t we? A wonderful life can be had by all. Let’s do it!

You’ve been given a great gift—a chance to see what the world would be like without you... Remember, George, no man is a failure who has friends...Each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?

Clarence, the Angel