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OUR JOURNEY

Community Inclusion Newsletter

It's all about connecting with others!

Stephen's Story: Connecting in a Rural Island Community

By Joni Takanikos & Mark Roughsedge

When the bell on the door tinkles, announcing the arrival of a visitor to the Whidbey Animals' Improvement Foundation (WAIF) animal shelter in Freeland, cats hop down from their perches and rise from their beds to see who has come to give them attention. One cat in particular, a black female called Marsha, meows at the sight of an old friend, Stephen. Stephen's love for animals led him to make weekly visits to the animal shelter in Coupeville, where he first met Marsha. When traveling to Coupeville became



Stephen and Marsha (above) just two old friends enjoying each others company.



Judy Dewing (left) really appreciates that Stephen comes by to give the resident cats so much attention.
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It's all about connecting with others!

Welcome to the Community Inclusion Newsletter! Our purpose is to share stories and experiences of individuals *with* intellectual disabilities actively participating in their communities with people *without* disabilities (neighbors, co-workers, friends, and other community members). We hope these stories inspire our readers to get involved in their local community by sharing interests with other community members.

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problematic and a new shelter opened in Free-land, much closer to home, it seemed a natural destination for Stephen. What a surprise to discover Marsha had been transferred to the new shelter!

“She is always so happy to see him,” says Judy Dewing, a caretaker at the WAIF shelter, as Stephen approaches his feline friend to give her a scratch behind the ears.

The good feelings are mutual. “I’m like her friend,” reports Stephen. “I like coming here so I can pet her and hug her.”

Visiting the WAIF shelter is only one of the numerous connections Stephen has made in his community. His interest in animals has also led to an ongoing role as “baby goat feeder” at the Little Brown Farm. Every day at 3:00, the twenty-odd baby goats at the farm need bottle feeding and, when his schedule permits, Stephen is there to help out.

On his first visit to the farm Stephen arrived ready to feed the baby goats, but he was told that the feeding would have to wait because one of the momma goats was in labor. Half an hour later, Stephen was holding a brand new baby goat in his arms! As Vicky Brown, owner of the farm, reminded him, rarely do visitors get to witness a labor and delivery on the farm. The smile



on Stephen’s face as he held the newborn goat attested to the fact that this connection will last a lifetime.



Stephen and his mom, Sandy, (above) feeding a baby goat at Little Brown Farm.

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The positive experience with the Little Brown Farm goats led to another recent outing, this time to visit a pair of milking goats owned by Laurie Keith. Once again, the animals took to Stephen like an old trusted friend, and he, in turn, gave them loving attention. “Goats are about community and bringing people together in a joyful way,” says Laurie. While this visit has not yet resulted in an ongoing role for Stephen, the opportunity is there for future involvement.

“These aren’t baby goats - but they still love attention!” Stephen with Laurie Keith’s (left) milk goats.

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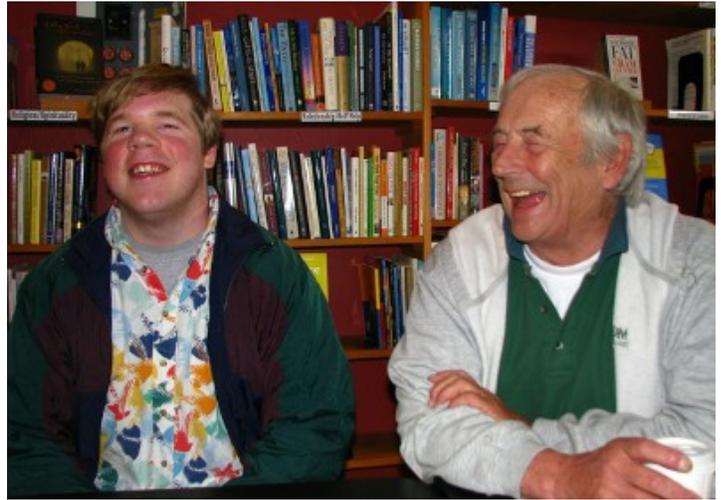
As Laurie says, “Stephen is always welcome to spend time with them.”

Stephen also volunteers at a local soup kitchen, where, in exchange for a bowl of hot soup and a dessert, he wipes down the tables after the lunchtime crowd has left.

Since transitioning home in July 2013, Stephen has been on a quest to find niches in the local community. His involvement with his Community Connectors began with his two “assistants” (a term Stephen finds appealing and comical when voiced with a French accent) brainstorming with him to generate a list of interests.

The idea of Community Connectors started in the late 1980’s, when John O’Brien, John McKnight and many other like-minded people realized that people with developmental disabilities were living in various communities, but often were still separated or isolated from the heart of community life. Assisting people to truly belong and contribute in ways that they chose became seen as an essential part of helping people with disabilities have a rich, full life. Thus, the idea of a Community Connector was created. In Stephen’s case, Roads to Community Living supported him in establishing his Community Connectors on Whidbey Island.

Using Stephen’s list, his assistants, Joni and Mark, made arrangements with local area residents for Stephen to visit their businesses or organizations. An interest in singing, for example, led to Stephen sitting in (and singing with!) the Open Circle Singers, a group of local residents who gather weekly at the local high school. A desire to learn more about mythology resulted in a couple of chats with Jim Riley, a retired Latin and Greek scholar, who



Jim Riley (above right) and Stephen share a good chuckle while discussing Greek mythology.

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proved to be an expert and passionate resource on Greek mythology.

“I like learning about Hades and other Greek Gods,” reports Stephen. Asked to share some of his newfound knowledge, he replies, “I learned that Hera is the Goddess of marriage!”

“I enjoy Stephen when he smiles or tells us what he’s excited about,” adds Jim. “He’s a good learner!”

Of his many interests, Stephen has a particular curiosity and passion for languages. Last spring, he indulged this passion by attending a “foreign language chat” at the Northwest Language Academy, where he listened to three members conversing in Russian and also sang along with some traditional Russian folk songs.

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Stephen with some of his 'Birthday Swag!'

Photos used with permission

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Stephen's interest in language also extends to coining new words. One such word, "*jedifiable*," an adverb, describes any activity that promotes longevity. The teachings of Yoda, from the Star Wars films, inspired Stephen to coin the term, which finds its way into many of Stephen's daily activities, whether it be exercising, eating healthy meals, or having an exhilarating experience. It's a great word to incorporate into your own conversations, and Stephen would love it if *jedifiable* became widely used!

At the end of each weekly outing Stephen and his two assistants visit one of the numerous local coffee shops, where Stephen can enjoy his favorite latte and a snack while discussing the day's activity and making plans for future adventures.

Early in their time together it became apparent that Stephen is most comfortable participating in short-duration activities, and so his assistants tailored their efforts toward connections that would match his preferences and tolerance. Although each idea for an outing is meant to provide Stephen an opportunity to make an immediate connection in his local community, even if one does not instantly develop, the groundwork has been laid for Stephen to make a future connection if and when he chooses to pursue one. His assistants view each attempt at making a connection as a spoke in the wheel of Stephen's life. The more spokes, the stronger the wheel.

Facing challenges and overcoming barriers has also been a focus for Stephen since beginning his involvement with his Community Connectors. Difficulties with spatial awareness can make negotiating stairs and curbs a challenge, but with the help of his two assistants Stephen has met the challenge with increasing success. He regularly travels on foot between various activities, providing many opportunities to practice maneuvering sidewalks and crosswalks, along with ascending and descending stairs. His greatest achievement involves a long (60 stairs!) stairway down to the waterfront in Langley, which Stephen has mastered now on several occasions.

When not traveling on foot, Stephen has become comfortable riding local transit into either Freeland or Langley. Bus drivers know him, and on one occasion a fellow passenger who had met Stephen while working at the soup kitchen "chatted him up" during a ride into Freeland. Just being present in his community has proven socially rewarding for Stephen. While on outings he has also encountered and reconnected with several other community members, including an old family friend who wished him well on his birthday, a teacher he knew in high school, and

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a former caretaker who checked in with Stephen while both were creating art at the Paint Escape. Each interaction brings a smile to Stephen's face, and further enhances his sense of place and belonging within the community.

Stephen's parents, Sandra and Dan, have witnessed Stephen's blossoming in the local community. "Having Community Connectors offered Stephen chances to form a base of positive routine experiences in the community. This, in turn, gave him confidence," says Sandra. "Now we have a base that we can continue to add to."

One of the primary reasons Stephen has enjoyed so many opportunities for connection is because of the people who live in his community. Initially there was a concern that a rural area might not provide an ideal setting for "connecting." Newcomers to our small island community, however, are surprised by the range of offerings available despite the small population. Many folks who have settled here want to share their backgrounds and gifts



As Susan Barrat looks on, Stephen applies a finishing coat of paint to a pottery project at Paint Escape.

Photos used with permission

with others, which has led to a diverse arts community as well as model environmental and social programs. Local area residents have consistently welcomed Stephen into their activities, providing assistance, encouragement, and friendship.

Community Inclusion occurs when:

- New relationships are built and current relationships are strengthened with neighbors, co-workers, friends, and other community members;
- Unique contributions are made with others in community settings (classrooms, board rooms, businesses, neighborhoods, community events, local organizations);
- Choices are available from a variety of possibilities to decide what to do, when and with whom;
- Strengths, gifts, and contributions are recognized and opportunities are available to learn more;
- People are respected and valued for what they have to offer;
- People feel strongly valued by others and are an integral part of a group or community.

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Sandra echoes this notion when she says, “South Whidbey Island is a small community, and due to the program many members of our community know Stephen a bit better, and he them.”

As we enter the final weeks of Stephen’s involvement with his Community Connectors, there are still more adventures yet to pursue. In addition to his ongoing quest to find *jedifiable* experiences, Stephen wants to meet people from different cultures, as well as continue his interest in foreign languages. While one of his long-term goals is to travel to Greece and other European countries, for now his island community can provide a touchstone to his varied interests, and his involvement broadens and enhances the whole of our community.

“Here at The Paint Escape we believe art is a universal way for all people to communicate and express themselves no matter the skill level. It is our goal to provide this opportunity to all individuals in the community.”

Susan Barrat, The Paint Escape



Community Connectors

A Community Connector helps a person with disabilities identify interests, talents and passions, and how they can give back and contribute to their community with like-minded local residents.

Stephen's two assistants, Joni and Mark, bring diverse skills and experiences to their roles as Community Connectors. Joni is a songwriter/performer, yoga instructor, and writer who in her twenty-two years of living on Whidbey Island has been involved in local arts organizations as well as other nonprofits that benefit the community. She is the very definition of someone who has “extensive connections” in her local community, one of the core requirements for success as a Community Connector. Mark has lived on Whidbey Island for only four years, but his background as a mental health professional specializing in children and families provided him the skills to effectively research and access community resources. Both Joni and Mark applied for the position of Community Connector because they share a passion for working with people as well as a desire to participate in activities that enhance the community and its residents. They also share a heartfelt belief in the philosophy of the Community Connector philosophy.

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Hot Tips for Community Inclusion

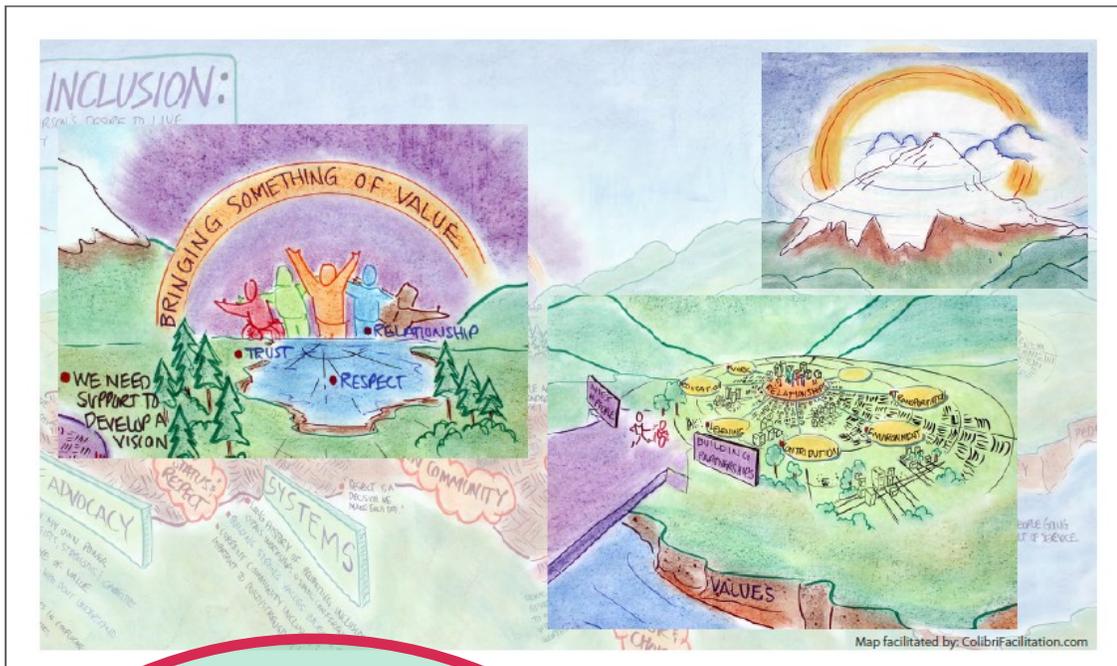
These hot tips come from Stephen and his Community Connector partners, Joni and Mark.

- Be adventurous and see each new connection as part of a quest to increase your client's options in creating new avenues into their community.
- Rural communities can offer just as many opportunities as urban settings.
- Look for opportunities where your client can transition from observer to participant.
- Keep in mind that even a one-time connection can lead to other connections. Community is like a roadmap of belonging for all of us.
- Honor your client's passions and interests when choosing possible ideas for connection.

Make a Difference

Look for updates on our Make a Difference Learning Partners in our next issue. They are busy finding new ways to be part of their communities and will share their adventures with us in December. Stay tuned!

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Be sure to check out the Blog!

We've been working hard behind the scenes to get all your stories, tips, pictures and ideas up on a Community Inclusion Blog/Photo Gallery. We really hope this becomes our 'virtual' community gathering spot. Please check it out! Let us know what you think, share your stories, hot spots, ideas - we really want you to be part of this!

<http://blog.satraininginstitute.org/community-inclusion/>.

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What is your story?

What stories can you share about individuals with developmental/intellectual disabilities living full lives in the community? Send them to us, tell us about them so we can send a reporter to you, and help to share what is possible!