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OUR JOURNEY

Community Inclusion Newsletter

It's all about connecting with others!

Eric's Story, A Visionary Activist in Action

By Joni Takanikos

Eric was born in Salt Lake City, Utah in May, 1977.

The doctor who delivered him advised his parents to place him in an institution. Eric's mom and dad disregarded the doctor's advice, took their beautiful new son home and thankfully ended up with a loving and supportive pediatrician. Barbara, Eric's mother, went to the library to educate herself regarding children born with intellectual, developmental or cognitive disabilities. Barbara found nothing in the library at that time and so she and her husband set about educating themselves, finding programs and parent groups to support Eric as he grew.

Eric's parents always strove to make sure that he was part of the larger community, but it wasn't always easy. In 1975, Federal Public Law 94-142 was passed as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act. It was later codified and is now known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (with the handy acronym of IDEA). With that law in place, Eric's parents



Eric proudly represents the Arc of King County!

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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.

Community Inclusion Newsletter

were able to insist politely yet firmly, that Eric be included in the public school's kindergarten classroom. Eric's mom and dad, as well as his older brother, all played a part in shaping him, as all families and communities do, but Eric's convictions and passions are all his own.

Years later, Eric began volunteering for advocacy groups. He trained as, and began working as a certified nursing assistant. In 2007, his family moved to Washington state. Even more doors opened for Eric, and he was ready to walk through them! Eric told me that Washington state is considered a mentor state in its hiring policies of people with disabilities.

After Eric's family moved to Washington, Eric attended an Arc of King County board meeting with an aim of joining the board. At that meeting, he met the person who was later to become his supervisor and co worker, Hye Kyong Jeong, the director of Outreach and Advocacy at The Arc. Hye told me she was immediately drawn to Eric and felt that he would make a valuable member of her team. She did not have anyone on her staff who had a disability, and she wanted to put into practice the importance of inclusion within the organization itself. She hired Eric in 2010 and his job has since grown to full time employment.



Eric loves his job as Outreach and Advocacy Coordinator and his co workers find his input invaluable. One co-worker said, "Eric grounds us and reminds us what we are working towards. His perspective shapes our work." Eric also has a job coach, Richard Mullens, and Eric believes strongly in the importance of that role for himself and others with disabilities. Richard said, "Eric is a very hard worker and his passion for equality is inspiring. It's an honor to be his job coach."



Above, Eric and his job coach, Richard Mullens, have a strong relationship.

Left, Hye Kyong Jeong is Eric's supervisor at the Arc of King County.

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One of the things that struck me, when I met Eric was how profoundly eloquent he is. In speaking with his mother Barbara, she told me that language had always been very important to Eric and considers it his main link to his environment. Along with his eloquence, he has always been drawn to the limelight, making it no surprise that Eric has become a gifted and sought after speaker for many organizations and conferences.

(Continued on page 3)

Community Inclusion Newsletter

(Continued from page 2)

When I asked Eric about his plans for the future, he told me that he would be happy to continue his work at the Arc until he retires. But his passions don't end at his job.

Eric is the Board President for **People First** of Washington, another non-profit advocacy group (www.peoplefirstofwashington.org) He is active in **Allies in Advocacy**. Their website, (www.alliesinadvocacy.com) includes the Proclamation of Dignity that you can read and sign online as an individual or organization. Eric was recently the keynote speaker in Portland, Oregon for the non-profit group **All Born (In)**, a movement in pursuit of an inclusive civil society (www.allbornin.org), and has been a speaker for Best Buddies International.

When I asked Eric what might come from his work with these advocacy groups, he said he looks forward to the day when no one among us is labeled, and that we be allowed to strive towards what we want for ourselves. Most important is dignity; whether we have success or failure is not important in this equation.

He also spoke of the importance for people to be allowed to try different things and to dream big, echoing something his mother once told him, "The world is your university." He said, "You never know what can happen. If you want to be an astronaut and go into outer space, it's out of this world. It's great to be part of a galaxy of opportunities!"

He told me that if there had to be a descriptor regarding people with disabilities, he would suggest that we think of all people as having "great abilities." When I asked Eric who his heroes are, he told me he loves the line from the Spider-Man movie, "With great power comes great responsibility." But his real life hero, he told me, is his mom. She believes in him and his great abilities.



Eric at his office at the Arc of King County.

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His mother told me a story about attending a meeting in Seattle recently and as often happens, when she mentioned her son Eric, a Somali woman who had seen Eric as a presenter at an advocacy function told Barbara how moved she had been by Eric's speech. She said, "In our country, no one would have any of these hopes for our children." Eric's ability to translate not only his own experiences but to speak on behalf of all people has a generative power, a reverberation that can reach communities far beyond his own. I can certainly see why Eric is sought after as a motivational speaker for so many advocacy organizations and wherever he travels, he will be an emissary of opportunity for all people.

Eric has met a few celebrities along his journey. Through his involvement with Buddies In-

(Continued on page 4)

Community Inclusion Newsletter

(Continued from page 3)

ternational, he has met Vice President Joe Biden, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and one of his favorite musicians, Kenny G.. Eric told me that he considers the Internet to be an important catalyst for great change in the world community, beginning and ending with dignity for all.

As I was leaving The Arc the afternoon of our interview, I remembered to ask Eric what his other interests are. He is an avid photographer and a lover of nature. In fact, last year he went with his family on safari in Kenya!



Through his advocacy work, Eric was able to meet Vice President Joe Biden and Jill Biden (above). He is also an avid photographer and snapped this shot of a baby lion cub while on safari with his parents (left)!
Photos used with permission

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.

Community Inclusion Newsletter

Hot Tips for Community Inclusion

Hot tips from Eric and our author, Joni Takanikos. Thank you!

- Jump on the internet highway to find a network of support organizations in your community and beyond.
- Look for the ‘galaxy of opportunities’ that exists when we refuse to limit ourselves and others because of challenges and a fear of failure.
- If a resource for inclusions does not exist in your community, form a group and create it! Look at other model resources to use as examples.
- Stay in touch with upcoming legislation or policies that affect/ create opportunities for inclusion. Educate yourself and your community about the policies already in place. How can you uphold and extend these policies?
- Look up towards that next peak for inclusion and dignity for all people. Climb steadfastly towards that peak!

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Community Inclusion Newsletter



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!