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OUR JOURNEY

Community Inclusion Newsletter

It's all about connecting with others!

Colleen's Story: Making a Difference in the rural town of Duvall WA

By Deborah Moskowitz

I met Colleen when she and her Learning Partner, Debbie, participated in a six-month Make a Difference workshop that I facilitated in the first half of 2015. The workshop, based on the work of John O'Brien and Beth Mount, provides strategies and support for people to discover their gifts and find their place in the community as valued, contributing citizens, with an emphasis on forming relationships. Colleen is a very talented woman with many gifts and interests--she's an artist, loves to act in the theater, enjoys organizing and cleaning, and genuinely seeks to help others. Her friendly demeanor, outgoing personality, and wonderful sense of humor, have propelled her to make new friends and connect with her community.

In beginning their Learning Partnership journey, Colleen and Debbie decided that they would start small, with "Project Hello." The initial goal was to walk around Colleen's neighborhood and say "Hi" to anyone they met. They decided that if someone responded, they would



Colleen and Debbie hanging out at CC's Coffee-house, where they are regulars and where Colleen is now a paid employee. *Photo used with permission.*

make further conversation. Almost immediately, they met John, who was putting things into a dumpster.

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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While they talked to him, they discovered that his mother had moved into assisted living and he was cleaning out her home. As Colleen helped John load items into the dumpster that day, she asked if he would like additional help packing and organizing. He took her up on her offer, and she spent several days helping him take care of his mother's belongings. In exchange for the hard work and company Colleen had provided, John gave her his mother's full-length fur coat, some small furniture and other items, as his way of thanking her for her help.



Above, Colleen in her yoga class, moving into the Downward Dog position. Many of her friends from the class plan to attend her art show this summer.

Right top, the owner of the local gallery will be having a showing of Colleen's art this summer.

Right bottom, Colleen spends a moment with the owner of the antique store next to CC's coffee shop, who has invited her to visit any time, saying "I think you and I are going to be friends."

Photos used with permission

Expanding upon "Project Hello", and as a way to get some exercise and become more limber, Colleen and Debbie decided to take a yoga class at a studio in town. They have been regularly attending a yoga class twice a week for months. The yoga has had positive results for both of

them and Colleen has started to form relationships with others in the class. She helps them get set up and they chat with her about the events in her life. They have taken a genuine interest in Colleen and are planning for the first time to visit with her outside of the studio.

Colleen and Debbie visited an art gallery that recently opened in town. Debbie introduced Colleen to the woman who owns the studio and explained that Colleen is an artist. Their conversation ended with the woman asking them to "please come back" once the studio was open. On a return visit, Colleen was invited to bring her framed artwork to the studio. Some of her artwork has been hanging in the gallery for the past month and she's now preparing for the opening of her own art show that will happen this summer. One of her friends from yoga spread word around the studio and everyone is planning to make the show a gala event!



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Along with her art, Colleen loves the theater and has had some past experience with it. She would like the opportunity to act in a play and with Debbie's support, has been in conversation with the director of the local community theater. In anticipation of an upcoming play, Debbie is helping Colleen develop and rehearse a brief monologue for her audition--very exciting!



Above and at right: Colleen works at the Duvall Visitor's Center two Saturdays a month helping customers at the front desk, providing refreshments and information.

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Colleen continued to want to expand her sphere of those she met and helped. One of her goals had been to participate in volunteer work. After investigating possibilities, she is now volunteering twice per month at the local

Visitors Center. She works on Saturdays, a busy day for visitors! Thanks to Colleen, visitors sign the guest book, receive flyers about interesting attractions and activities in the area, and enjoy refreshments. Colleen has become a valued volunteer at the center.

Colleen and Debbie have become a part of the fabric of Duvall. When their journey began, they would meet at one of the local coffee shops in town to discuss Colleen's gifts and plan their adventures. That part of Colleen and Debbie's partnership still continues and those journeys are taking Colleen further than she would have thought.

Colleen has gotten to know the barista and some of the regulars, and she often pitches in to wipe down tables and tidy up. That initiative caught the eye of the woman who owns the antique store next to the coffee shop. She was so impressed with Colleen's efforts to pitch in around the coffee shop that she recently hired her to clean bathrooms at the antique store once a week. Colleen has wanted a paid job and is thrilled about this!



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Colleen and Debbie have been courageous in trying new things and working through any rough spots that have cropped up. They made a concerted effort to look for places in which they are welcome. Colleen has blossomed, learning many of new things and refining her communication and social skills. Debbie has blossomed as well, as she has deepened her

relationship with Colleen and learned new ways to support her. I feel that these Learning Partners are truly the living example of the Make a Difference work, and they've been an inspiration to everyone around them. I know that Colleen and Debbie will not stop with just these successes, as Colleen has come alive with the wonderful opportunities and the rich life that she now has!



Colleen and Debbie made this story-board to illustrate their Learning Journey as part of the Make a Difference workshop in which they participated. Each picture shows a new and wonderful activity that is now a part of Colleen's life.

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.

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Hot Tips for Community Inclusion

Hot tips from Colleen and Debbie. Thank you!

Lead with your gifts - focus on what you have to offer and find places those gifts are appreciated. If you like helping others, find someplace to volunteer to help, such as a community festival, the local food bank or a nearby pet shelter.

Look for welcoming places - these are typically places where there is a diversity of people, which signals that all are welcome. Places where you are greeted when you walk in and are made to feel comfortable are most likely places where you'll make a connection.

Make a contribution - people are usually welcome when they offer to contribute their time and talents. If you are an artist, you might be welcome at the community theater when they are painting sets. Delivering meals to people who are unable to cook makes you a welcome visitor.

For people who are providing support - accompany only the person you are supporting when you go out in the community to work on making connections. No groups--not ever!

If you're providing support - lead with kindness. How we are with the people we support has a lot to do with how others will see and treat them.

Become a "regular" at a favorite place. Relationships form from being in each other's company over time and having shared experiences.

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Dear readers,

We want to take a moment to thank everyone for the opportunity over the past 3 years to bring you some incredible stories of people who are involved in their community. We want to thank DDA Roads to Community Living for funding this newsletter. We want to thank everyone who brought these stories to our attention and those who contributed to the stories. We would also like to thank the writers and editors for their amazing work in bringing these stories to life and to print. But most importantly we want to thank the individuals who chose to be featured and whose lives inspire all of us to live life to its fullest.

While this will be the final Community Inclusion Newsletter, you can still find all of the back issues of the newsletter at <http://blog.satraininstitute.org/community-inclusion/?disp=arcdir>. We hope that you take the opportunity to read these articles, to find motivation in their stories, and to find ways to build community into your own lives and the lives of others. Thank you again for your support!

Service Alternatives Training Institute