

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Welcome Home: Transitioning From One Reputation to Another

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There is a difference between a diagnosis and a reputation. A diagnosis takes a bunch of behaviours, tosses them in a box, ties them up with a nice bow, and sticks a label on to warn people of the contents. It's clean. It's neat. It's very, very, clinical. A reputation, however, is something quite different, particularly for people with disabilities who have a long history of problem behaviour, of medication after medication, of injured staff after injured staff, of restraint hold after restraint hold. This reputation, with all the messy examples that grow in the telling, is perhaps the biggest barrier to community living and a willingness of an agency, or staff within an agency, to accept someone into care.

This is the tale of one such man and one such team. He came with 'reputationitis' and was met with 'purposeful and intentional welcome.' The road was long and hard for everyone concerned but, in the end, he and the staff team wanted to share what was learned along the way. This is written for those of you who one day may be challenged to offer service to someone who, despite reputation, despite diagnosis, despite fears and despite risks, like everyone else, needs a safe place, a place to call home.

It Starts with Values

Agencies may have missions, visions and values, but, they can be forgotten, without the direct support workers embracing those values and internalizing the mission, they remain words on paper. As a team we looked inside ourselves, we talked about what it meant to be doing the work we were doing. We knew we were being asked to support a man with a significant history of aggression and violence. We knew we were being asked to welcome a man who would be predicting his own failure. He lived where he lived because he had failed in the community – he saw the community as a place that rejects, not as a place that accepts; he saw the community as a place which had hurt him before. We knew, because of all this, that our goal, our first and most important goal was to determine, as a team, that we would work towards success at all costs,



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that we would commit ourselves to earning his trust, that no matter how rough the ride, we would make it through to the end.

In all this we discovered something important. We shared the agency's vision of a world that welcomed difference. We, each, individually wanted the word 'home,' to mean 'home,' for someone who had never experienced what it was to be warm and welcome at home.

It Starts with a Decision

We all agreed that, no matter how tough it got, we would never say things that made 'home' seem like it was a reward, like it was something that could be taken away by the performance of certain behaviours. We would never say, for example, "You keep this up and you won't be able to live here," or "One more time and we'll have to send you back," or "This is unacceptable; we never should have taken you here." There would be no indication that this move was anything but a move home. And home – is home.

It Starts with a Definition

Let's take a look at how the internet defines the expression, 'at home:'

- 1: relaxed and comfortable: at ease,
- 2: in harmony with the surroundings,
- 3: on familiar ground.

This was our goal. We were going to make sure, at the end of the day, he felt at home. Just looking at the definition reminded all of us of how important our job was. We provided more than 'residential supports' ... we made 'home' possible. That's an inspiring thought. And, there would be times we needed to remember and re-inspire ourselves along the way.

The Introduction before the Introduction

As the staff team, we knew we would be last on the list of those who would meet the man who would be coming home to us. We understand that this is a necessary process and were glad there were those out gathering information, putting together profiles, writing up recommendations. We knew we would be involved in the transition, from design to follow through, but the first stage was getting down on paper what the issues were, what approaches were used and what adaptations would be needed in order to keep him, and those around him, safe.

But.

Wow.

That first meeting where we were being introduced to him, as the reports saw him and as his history and reputation presented him, was a rocky start. It's fine to have all these noble ideas and all these wonderful values but, when faced with someone's history and hearing about things they've done in the past, it's a little more difficult.

Then.

We decided, and this is one of the best pieces of advice we can give you, not to wallow in the fears of others. This is harder than you might imagine. We recognized that we needed to learn his history, hear of his past, not to be frightened by it, but to be informed by it. We took this as information, that's all. We listened to hear of the life this fellow had lead and, instead of being frightened or scared away, we listened to the stories to understand the importance of the move and the importance that, this time, he succeeds. We were reinforced in our idea that everyone deserves a home and choices and respect.

The team was positive, but not naive. Hours were spent reading past incidents and preparing the new environment for support needs and possible behavioural intervention. Specialized training and hours of practicing were completed to ensure the team was prepared – safety was a top priority. History is important to learn from and the team took this very seriously. The stories and the rumors about this man, however, stayed in the halls of the past; the team refused to continue to spread these horrifying tales – a new life and new start was being offered.

The Introduction

Meeting someone after hearing towering stories of aggression and violence can come as a shock. All those words in all those reports, all those stories and all the data documenting concerns is really just a person. A person with hopes and dreams. When he arrived, he barely spoke and, when he did, it was only a few words. No one knew whether he once had words and stopped using them or if he was someone who spoke rarely and simply. Even though we had all read about him, heard about him, met about him, were trained to support him, we all tried, really hard, to meet him fresh.

This is hard to do. It means pushing aside everything you've learned, pushing aside the voices of anxiety nipping at your consciousness, pushing aside the fears of others. It means saying 'hello' and having it mean, 'this is a fresh start.'

Giving Power Back

Routine and consistency in their approach at all times was key in making this transition a success. The team allowed him to take the lead and tell them what and when he needed something. Being listened to, his words, his gestures, his body language, mattered. The team knew this would build trust, but it was also something more than that. This man was experiencing what it was like to have his own sense of power. Aggression can be a way someone who feels powerless can assert power – from the get go, we wanted him to know he had power; we didn't contest the power he had; we had no intention of taking it away from him.

And a strange thing started to happen. His vocabulary was growing. Slowly, very slowly, his voice was emerging.

Privilege

There were several moments along the way where we felt incredibly privileged, but perhaps the most powerful moment was the realization that the voice he had suppressed for so long was coming out. It was a signal that he trusted us to hear him. He trusted us to share his feelings. He trusted us to allow his words to direct his life, to make his own choices and to determine what happened next.

The Power of Choice

The words he spoke were allowing him to be himself and to express his desires. He now was offered choices in his day to day life, when to go to bed, when and what to eat. Choices were offered slowly, staff wanting to respect that, for him, this was a new environment and a new way of life. When a choice was made, it was always respected. He was welcomed in this space; he was acknowledged and listened to. He was given the ok to be who he was; he didn't have to be someone we thought he should be. The team made sure these new walls he was in were his home.

Choices were offered and followed through with instead of being corrected. These choices were not always easy at first, time and patience were needed. Lots of preparations were necessary to ensure choices being offered were safe and available. The team ensured he would experience his community in a safe and enjoyable manner. With these experiences came even more words and the team worked to understand him and his way of communicating. It was no longer his job to understand those who took care of him, but our job to understand him. He was the center of his life and his choices. It was the team's job to find out how to offer these things to him in a way which was safe and enjoyable.

The Power of Respect

Knocking on his bedroom door, asking if we could come in was very strange and confusing for him, even so, we worked at developing healthy boundaries – he was experiencing privacy for, maybe, the first time in his life. We may call this 'boundaries training,' but really we were simply practicing a respectful approach to someone in his own home. He embraced respectful approaches very quickly. He had his very own space and he took pride in it. Slowly trust was built with the support staff. Time, patience, consistency and respect were the key in developing the trust that was needed for him to grow as an individual.

The Power of Pride

Perhaps because of a history of outburst behaviours, people in the past had stopped asking him to participate in the daily expectations which come with living in the community. He was used to having support – staff doing everything for him, from helping him shower to helping him set a table. He wanted, now, to learn to do these things independently. He took pride in the new skills he was acquiring.

He was meeting people and making friends. We all remember, again with a sense of privilege, the day he opened the front door to welcome in friends he had invited over. He was so proud of his home.

(Home: where he was relaxed and comfortable and at ease with himself, where he lived in harmony with the surroundings, on newly familiar ground.)

New Stories, New Reputations

He became himself, the man who enjoyed new clothes, a good cup of coffee and a good laugh. He became a friend to his housemates and enjoyed making friends with others. He became a man who took a woman on a date. Each relationship, each experience increased his vocabulary. He became the gentle man who greeted you at the kitchen table with a big smile on his face. The stories from the institution faded from the staff's memories. He was finally himself and not the list of behaviors that were in his file.

The team continues to ensure they are always prepared and safety is never forgotten. The team continues to work on building trust and giving power back. This man was once considered hard to serve. The team has shown that if you have a group of people willing to work as a team, with the right attitude, consistency, knowledge and preparation the right to have a home and live in your community can be a goal for all people.

The Last Word

The last word belongs to him. He knows about this article, knows that his story might help others; he wanted to bring his own message about being home to you. Here's what he said about home and community.

"I like my bedmy house.....my radio....makes me feel better. I like it here."

Our job was to make 'here' his. It's one of the best jobs ever.

About the Authors

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Happy Holiday Season

Angie and I, along with the staff at Vita Community Living Service and Hands **TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca**, join to wish all of our readers, wherever you are in the world, a happy holiday season. Diversity is at its most beautiful during feasts and festivals. However you celebrate, may you do so in peace.

Dave and Angie

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