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*"A sense of belonging appears to be a basic human need - as basic as food and shelter.*

*Dr. Kenneth Pelletier*

# CIRCLES OF FRIENDS: ACCEPTANCE, BELONGING, & COMMUNITY

A Newsletter from *Community Opportunities*

## The Importance of Belonging

By David Pitonyak

Many people who experience disabilities live lives of extreme loneliness and isolation. Many depend almost exclusively on their families for companionship. Some have lost their connections to family, relying on people who are paid to be with them for their social support. Although paid staff can be friendly and supportive, they frequently change jobs or take on new responsibilities. The resulting instability can be devastating to someone who is fundamentally alone.

Bob Perske describes how a person whose life is devoid of meaningful relationships might feel: "We have only begun to sense the tragic wounds that so many [persons with developmental disabilities] may feel when it dawns on them that the only people relating with them -- outside of relatives -- are paid to do so. If you or I came to such a sad realization about ourselves, it would rip at our souls to even talk about it."

In my view, most people served by the human services industry are profoundly lonely. Loneliness is the central reason why so many are unhappy and distraught. It is not because our instructional strategies are ill-informed or because our planning processes are inadequate. It is not because our medications are in-potent or because staff are untrained. Their suffering results from isolation. As Willard Gaylin has written, "To be vulnerable is not to be in jeopardy. To be vulnerable and isolated is the matrix of disaster."

For years, the human services profession has been pre-occupied with three questions: What's wrong with you? How do we fix you? What do we do with you if we can't fix you?

I believe these are the wrong questions. The central function of our human services system, in my view, should be to help people who experience disabilities to develop and maintain "enduring, freely chosen relationships." The field is now moving toward a much more promising set of questions: What are your capacities and gifts and what supports do you need to express them? What works well for you and what does not? What are your visions and dreams of a brighter future and who will help you to move toward that future? In addition to these questions, I like those posed by Mary Romer. Mary's questions strike me as fundamental to anyone's success: Are enough people engaged in the person's life? Are there people who are imbued with the belief and hope for a brighter, better future for the person? If not, how might such people be found or how might that sense of hope be instilled in those committed to walking with the person?



The awareness that an individual's success over his or her lifetime depends on "enduring and freely chosen relationships" is a central reason why Community Opportunities is working so hard in southwest Virginia to develop and sustain circles of support and microboards around people with disabilities. When a group of people join together with intention to support an individual, when they are infused with a sense of hope and optimism for a better future, the chances of real happiness, and of BELONGING, grow dramatically.

Portions of this article are taken from "The Importance of Belonging," which can be downloaded in its entirety from David Pitonyak's web site: [www.dimage.com](http://www.dimage.com).

# Featuring

## Peter Gwazdauskas: by Mac McArthur-Fox



Judy Gwazdauskas remembers a time when she worried about how many friends her son Pete would have, about how “big” his world would be. That was back when Pete was just a little guy, before he was fully included with his peers at school. That was when Judy heard David Pitonyak talk about the lives of many people with disabilities. He talked about the loneliness they often experience. He talked about kids whose lives are only “two rooms big” – home and a single, segregated classroom at school. Kids and adults who live lonely lives, cut-off from the kinds of meaningful activities and friendships we all value in life. And Judy worried about what kind of life her son, Pete, would have. Judy isn’t worried about the size of Pete’s world any more.

Pete is 22 now, a Blacksburg High School graduate, and living in his own house – along with three VT students (who are his housemates and personal assistants) and several dogs.

With his housemates, Pete is a “regular” at many places throughout the community: shopping at local stores, walking on the Tech campus, volunteering, eating out or working out at The Weight Club.

Pete still spends time with his folks, too. He’s especially happy when visits can include attendance at a Blacksburg High School football or soccer game (once a fan, always a fan!) or a Tech football game. Pete works four mornings a week at Au Bon Pain in Squires Student Center on campus and volunteers one morning a week at the Weight Club where he fills a needed role. And, like many young adults his age, he may be looking for a second job, something that will allow him to use his many skills, pay his share of the rent, and leave enough pocket change for a few trips to Taco Bell or Macado’s every month.

It took a lot of work to get to the place where Pete is today. Pete worked hard throughout high school to learn all the skills he uses on the job, at home and in the community. His mom has spent countless hours recruiting and training Pete’s assistants and “fine tuning” his support, dealing with the many new situations that inevitably come along. And Pete has both a circle of support and a microboard (“Pete’s Circle of Dreams”), people who come together regularly to help brainstorm solutions to problems and make sure that Pete stays connected with a whole network of friends.

Facilitation for Pete’s circle and microboard is provided by Community Opportunities – help to guide circle and microboard discussions so that everyone who knows and cares about Pete can help to make sure that life now, and in the future, is full and rich.

Pete’s life looks a lot like the lives of many 22 year olds. His world isn’t nearly as narrow, limited or lonely as the lives of many adults with disabilities. Pete belongs and is happy, and Judy isn’t nearly as worried any more.

### **Want to learn more about Community Opportunities and our important work with folks like Pete?**

Do you need a speaker for your civic group, club, community organization, or faith community?

Community Opportunities will be happy to speak to your group, make a PowerPoint presentation, or meet with individuals in your group to share about our work and how you can help us.

email us:  
MicroboardsNRV@aol.com

# Board Briefs

## Robert Metz

Robert has served on the board of Community Opportunities since 2002. He is a native of Blacksburg and a recent graduate of Blacksburg High School. Among his many talents are his legendary cooking abilities. Robert currently works as a prep cook at Backstreets Restaurant and at Lefty's Grill, and he dreams of someday being the head chef at the Hotel Roanoke. He brings tremendous energy and enthusiasm to the Board of Community Opportunities, and we are fortunate to have his service to our organization as well as his favorite holiday recipe included in this newsletter!



Board members Chris Burton and Robert Metz

## Chris Burton

One of our founding Board members, Chris Burton has spent the past year in Washington, DC working for Congressman Bobby Scott of Virginia as a Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation Fellow in Public Policy. We are proud of Chris for being chosen for this prestigious award. She will be continuing her work to build a statewide advocacy network whose mission is to reform the long-term support system in Virginia for people with disabilities.

## Nana's Peppermint Brownies

### Brownies

2 sticks butter  
4 eggs  
2 cups granulated sugar  
1 1/2 cups sifted all purpose flour  
2 tsp vanilla  
6 Tbsp cocoa  
pinch of salt  
2 cups nuts (optional)

### Peppermint topping

1 stick butter (softened)  
1 pound 10x powdered sugar  
1 tsp vanilla  
5 oz peppermint candy, crushed

### Frosting

1 stick butter  
6 Tbsp cocoa  
8 Tbsp whipping cream  
1 pound 10x powdered sugar  
1 tsp vanilla

Making the Brownies: Melt butter in saucepan. Add cocoa and sugar; stir till blended. In mixing bowl beat eggs. Add butter-cocoa-sugar mixture and blend. Add salt, vanilla, then flour. Continue to beat till thoroughly blended. Add nuts (optional). Stir and spread into a well greased 11x5 inch pan. Bake at 350 for 30 minutes. Allow brownies to cool before adding topping and frosting.

Topping: Put all peppermint topping ingredients into a mixing bowl and beat till of spreading consistency. You may need to add a little whipping cream. Spread over cooled brownies.

Frosting: Melt butter in a saucepan. Add cocoa and cream; cook till thickened. In a mixing bowl put powdered sugar. Add chocolate mixture and beat. Add vanilla, beat till smooth, and spread over topping.

**Community Opportunities** is pleased to welcome our newest Board member:

**Judy Gwazdauskas**

**“Belonging begins with welcoming - thoughtfully, carefully, joyfully, lovingly. The opening movements in the dance of life must carry mutual acknowledgement, recognition and appreciation. This is not a fast or finished work. It is a life long adventure.”**

~ Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint and John O'Brien



## DID YOU KNOW



- In 2002, 3958 people with significant disabilities lived in large nursing homes and state institutions in Virginia.
- 36 out of 50 states have closed one or more of their large state institutions as part of the trend toward providing support to individuals in the community.
- Virginia is not one of those 36 states. All of Virginia's large state institutions remain open.

**Community Opportunities is working to help people have better lives through the personal commitment of their circles of support and microboards.**



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