



CIRCLES OF FRIENDS: ACCEPTANCE, BELONGING, & COMMUNITY

A Newsletter from *Community Opportunities*

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You can't teach the value of love and diversity or tolerance by preaching or lecturing at people – we all have to live these values and have real situations to test our morality and humanity.

~Marsha Forest

Ian's Story

Ian is a young man who graduated from high school two years ago and experiences Asperger's Syndrome. He lives in his own apartment, with his cat, Protégé. They live in the same apartment building as Ian's dad.

Ian works 20 hours/week for Tech Electric. His responsibilities have progressively increased over the past couple of years, and he's become a really valued and dependable employee.

Throughout high school, Ian had few friends. He left school with no strong friendships and only a small number of family members who live at all close by or can be very involved in Ian's life. Ian's dad is a single parent who's experienced a number of chronic and serious health problems. His dad was increasingly concerned about what will happen to Ian when he is no longer able to help Ian make day to day and big life decisions.

Ian's dad approached Community Opportunities about helping to create a microboard for Ian. A microboard is a small group of committed family and friends that form a non-profit association with a person with a disability. The microboard exists to provide support and empowerment to that one person, ensuring that support is directed by the individual with a disability, and those who know and love him or her best, and provided in ways that ensure the individual's dreams and preferences are honored. A strong circle of friendship and support is the foundation for a microboard. Microboard and circle members help the person with a disability make and keep meaningful friendships, become more involved in community activities, make a

contribution to the community, dream about and make plans for the future, and get the resources and support needed to live a full, rich life.

Community Opportunities helps pull together the group of folks who will form a microboard; provide facilitation as the microboard members plan and problem solve; link the microboards with available services and supports; and guide the group in developing and monitoring needed resources and supports. In the fall of 2003, Community Opportunities assisted in the development of a circle of support around Ian. A group of people who know Ian began meeting with him to talk about his life, including how to help him meet new people and get more involved in the community. They also wanted to make



Ian (3rd from left) at a recent meeting of his circle of support

sure support will be in place long-term for Ian, even when his dad is no longer around.

Ian's circle started small, with more people gradually joining. His circle grew to include his father and an aunt; a supervisor and his "boss" from work; a friend of his dad's who shares Ian's interest in technology; a former high school teacher; a VT student who has

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Ian's Story

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known Ian since middle school; and several people paid to provide support to Ian at home and work.

The circle helped Ian identify his strengths and interests, which include Civil War history, the Japanese culture and language, politics, Celtic festivals, Dungeons and Dragons, and helping other people in need. Circle meetings have often focused on celebrating the many ways Ian is becoming more independent and continuing to brainstorm ways he can meet other people who share his interests. Through circle contacts, Ian met a Radford University student who shares Ian's passion for history, and they've met regularly since to talk about two common interests – history and Dungeons and Dragons. One circle member, his former high school teacher, has met weekly with Ian for several months, discussing a book they're both reading. Ian and his work supervisor together filled a number of boxes at Christmas to send to children through an international giving program. A goal for next year is for Ian to save some of his own money to help fill the gift boxes!

This spring, the Community Opportunities facilitator helped Ian's circle begin working toward incorporation as a microboard.

The circle members who will form Ian's microboard have worked on drafting the articles of incorporation and by-laws necessary for incorporation. Once incorporated, Ian's microboard will continue to meet regularly, helping him to evaluate the support he receives, problem-solve, and dream about the future. A Community Opportunities facilitator will continue to provide facilitation and technical assistance any time it's needed by Ian's microboard.

Incorporating as a microboard will help ensure the network of support will last throughout Ian's lifetime; members will come and go, but the microboard will always be there for Ian. While all his circle members are important in Ian's life, only those people not paid to provide support for him will become members of his microboard. Because one of the microboard's most important roles is helping Ian evaluate whether he is satisfied with the support he's receiving, people paid to provide support are not members of the microboard. However, Ian may invite them to attend many meetings as "advisors" or in a support capacity, since they are often the



Ian (left) and his friend, Jay

people who help Ian carry out the plans he makes with his microboard.

Things have changed a lot for Ian over the past year and a half. At the first couple of meetings, circle members really had to pull information from Ian, and he often wanted to leave before the meeting ended. With guidance from a Community Opportunities facilitator, over time Ian has begun taking more and more of an active role at his meetings. This past December, Ian started running his own meetings! Each meeting truly is a celebration of who Ian is and his many successes. Ian says he likes his meetings because "the company is good." Life is indeed better for each of us when we're doing things we like – with people we like.

Want to learn more about Community Opportunities and our important work with folks like Ian?

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

*Internationally acclaimed
folk singer and musician
John McCutcheon -
coming to the Lyric Theatre
in October!*

*Support
Community Opportunities
by joining us for this
incredible evening.*

Board Briefs

Featured Board Member – Paul Sale

A Board member since 2001, Paul is also a member of the Executive Committee. Dean of the College of Education and Human Development at Radford University, Paul has led a broad and exemplary career in the field of education. As a former special education teacher who worked with students with significant disabilities in a variety of school and vocational settings, Paul has long been a strong advocate for full inclusion of people with disabilities and an equally vocal critic of practices which lead to segregation and isolation. We are extremely appreciative of Paul's focused and incisive thinking about the work of building Community Opportunities into a strong and influential voice in Virginia.



Comings and Goings ...

Community Opportunities bids farewell to Board member **Steve Bickley**. As the parent of a young adult with a disability, Steve will continue to be involved in creating a strong community which truly welcomes all members.

Community Opportunities welcomes **new Board member Michele Wolfert**. Michele comes to the Board with extensive experience in athletic development and fundraising at Georgia Tech. More recently, Michele served as the first Director of Development and Special Events at the YMCA at Virginia Tech. We are excited about the expertise and enthusiasm Michele brings to the Board and her commitment to expanding Community Opportunities' strong base of support within this community.

Community Opportunities Hosts First Spring Dinner!



On the evening of April 2nd, snow, sleet and wind blew in stormy gusts, a wintry mix in defiance of the early-spring calendar date. Inside the Conference Center ballroom at Radford University's Business and Technology Park, however, the candlelit room sparkled with light and laughter, punctuated by cheery daffodil-filled baskets. With almost 80 in attendance, Community Opportunities' first fundraising dinner was a lovely mix of fine food (catered by Baker's Best Catering of Radford), delightful jazz music (provided by the Flip Shoemaker Trio) and, most importantly, the conversation of good folks brought together by a common commitment to expanding the definition of "community" for people with significant disabilities.

Highlights of the evening included recognition of two people who've profoundly impacted Community Opportunities:

Jim Rakes – President of the National Bank of Blacksburg, Jim has become a major supporter of Community Opportunities over the past couple of years. Jim's commitment to community, as evidenced through his financial support of Community Opportunities, was gratefully acknowledged.

Kate McCoy – A founding member of the "kitchen table" group which began meeting in 1998, Kate has served as President of Community Opportunities' Board of Directors since its incorporation as a non-profit in 2001. Kate has recently swapped roles with Chris Burton, and is now serving as Board Secretary. Across the years, Kate has been a constant loving, guiding force. Community Opportunities is indeed fortunate to be gifted with her strength and wisdom.

The evening closed with laughter and a few tears as storyteller and human services consultant **David Pitonyak** shared about his friend, Roland, and the heart-tugging lessons learned about friendship and commitment.

This issue of *Circle of Friends* is funded in large part by a grant from The Community Foundation of the New River Valley.



Once we have learned to understand that a community is composed of a series of partnerships which unlock the potential of each of the participants, we can begin to look creatively at ways to incorporate even the most excluded and “marginalized” individuals into the process of active community building.

-Judith Snow



DID YOU KNOW



- In 2003, 172,848 students received special education services in Virginia.
- Of that total, 58,930 were in the “transition” (14 to 22 year olds) age group.
- In a recent statewide assessment of transition services (DeFur & Getzel, 2003), the need for funding to address service gaps arising when students transition from school to adult service systems was cited as a significant barrier to success for young adults with disabilities.

Community Opportunities facilitates circles of support and microboards for several transition age young adults, helping to ensure that needed supports are in place when high school ends. With the support of committed family and friends, young adults with disabilities can continue to live in the community as active, contributing members of our communities.



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Annual Update from Community Opportunities

Highlights of Our Accomplishments

- Expanded support to people with disabilities through ongoing facilitation of microboards and circles of support
- Advocated at the state level for funding and support controlled by people with disabilities and their families/allies
- Networked with microboard support organizations in other states, and affiliated with Vela Microboard Association of British Columbia, pioneer of the microboard support model
- Broadened our base of community support through our semiannual newsletter, presentations to community groups, a targeted mailing campaign, and individual and corporate contacts
- Launched our first Board fundraising campaign, and, in early April, exceeded our goal of raising \$30,000 by May 31st!

Why We Need Your Continued Support

- Community Opportunities provides a unique long-term support model at no cost to individuals with disabilities and their families.
- The microboard model creates real opportunities for people with disabilities to have lives of their choosing – filled with friendship, work, play and choices about day to day life and the future – in their community.
- This support is highly cost effective – our low overhead covers the salary of a half-time paid director, with smaller amounts budgeted for costs such as insurance and printing and postage; staff and Board members work from their homes, and no costs accrue for typically high dollar items such as rent, utilities and vehicles.

Community Opportunities continues to rely on individuals, businesses, churches and foundations within our community for financial support.