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*All human beings  
have an innate  
need to hear and  
tell stories and to  
have a story to  
live by....*

*- (William) Harvey  
Cox*

# CIRCLES OF FRIENDS: ACCEPTANCE, BELONGING, & COMMUNITY

## A Newsletter from *Community Opportunities*

### Stories Held. Stories Told.

- David Pitonyak

I hope, wherever you come from, there is someone who holds your story. Someone who remembers you when you were knee-high to a grasshopper. Where I come from – Montpelier, Vermont – there are people who hold my story. Marie Blakely, one of my mother's best friends, still calls me "Two Tot," a nickname I acquired as a two year old. She still calls me "Two Tot" and I am glad she does.

At my mother's funeral, Maria came to me at the church and held my face in her hands. "Your mother was a warm mother, Two Tot, and a warm mother always goes to the river first."

And then she told me this story: One August morning, when I was less than two, still a baby in diapers, my mother put me in the back yard with my older sisters and closed the gate. "Watch the baby" she told them. From there, she went back inside the house and began to pick up. "Pick up, pick up, pick up" Maria said, still holding my face. "All a mother does when she has five children is pick up, pick up, pick up."

After 10 minutes or so, not much longer, my mother would stop picking up and return to the porch to make sure I was all right. If I understood Maria correctly, "all right" basically meant that I was not bleeding. A mouth full of dirt, tears, a missing diaper – things so minor did not fulfill the criteria for hands on intervention. Only blood would bring my mother to my rescue and it had to be my blood.

It was during one of these checks that my mother discovered "gate open" and "baby gone." She asked my sisters "Where's the baby?" and they both

began to argue. "It's Marsha's turn to watch the baby!" Jani screamed. "It is not!" Marsha screamed back.

Maria, still holding my face at the church, said, "Two Tot, your mother did not wait for the girls to settle their argument. She went immediately to the river."

My mother was worried that I would wander to the Winooski River and get caught in the fast water. But I was not on my way to the river, I was heading in almost the opposite direction towards the Montpelier swimming pool where my two older brothers, Michael and Steven, were taking swimming lessons. I wandered almost a mile from our home when Betty Cody, watering her flowers, saw me – a baby in diapers, walking with the family dog Brownie (a long-haired yellow dog) – without the supervision of an adult. She raced to pick me up. Apparently, she knew right away that I was a Pitonyak and she called my mother. But my mother was not home, she was at the river, so Betty called the police who promised to send a squad car.

Maria held my face a little tighter to let me know that this part of the story was



most important. "Two Tot" she said beneath one of the tall spires of St. Augustine's church, "Your diaper was full of poop."

"You smelled horrible, Two Tot!" she cackled. "The policeman put you in the back seat of the car with the dog and the

## Exciting New Grant Funded Project

Community Opportunities has received funding through the Virginia **Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services** for a **Community Inclusion Project**. Funded for a two-year period, the project focuses on supporting people who are institutionalized or in danger of institutionalization, helping each to develop a network of friends in the community. The project will help each network incorporate as a microboard and explore whether microboards can serve as guardians for those in need of decision-making support. Community Opportunities is partnering with **Central Virginia Training Center, New River Valley Community Services and Wall Residences** for the project.

## McCutcheon Concert a Success



Internationally acclaimed folk musician John McCutcheon was warmly received by an audience of Community Opportunities supporters at the Lyric Theatre in Blacksburg on Thursday, September 29, 2005. John is a gifted songwriter and storyteller and the master of a dozen different traditional instruments, including the hammer dulcimer. John's often humorous political commentary resonated well with the audience, as did his passionate commitment to community. For Community Opportunities Board and staff, the evening was a delightful opportunity to

create a space to celebrate the strong and vibrant community of which we are a part here in the New River Valley. Special thanks go to Radford University's College of Education and Human Development for support of the evening.

## Stories Held. Stories Told. *(continued from page 1)*

dog – the *dog*, Two Tot! – he jumped to the front seat! When the police car came around the corner to your home, the policeman had his head out the window and the dog – the *dog*, Two Tot! – he had his head out the window! You smelled horrible!”

I was laughing and crying as Maria held my face. “The policeman picked you up from the front seat and handed you to your mother, Two Tot!” she said. “She kissed you and cried. She was a warm mother, Two Tot. A warm mother will always go to the river first.” Gently, she slapped my face as if to warn, “Do not forget.”

I hope, wherever you come from, there is someone who holds your story. Someone who remembers you when you were knee-high to a grasshopper. Being *known* is critical to our well-being. Having our story held and told by others gives us long, powerful roots.

Community Opportunities has recently been awarded an important grant to support people living in institutions to move back to their communities. All these individuals experience developmental disabilities and many have lost contact with their families and friends.

For decades, Virginia routinely institutionalized children and adults with disabilities rather than the

more sensible choice of supporting families to raise their children at home and creating strong community supports, and the effects have been devastating. Thousands have been ripped from the families they love, their communities, their stories – all in the name of “treatment.”

Thank God we have made progress. We now know that what people who experience disabilities most need is what we all need – to be loved and to love, to experience real opportunity and choice, a sound education, a chance to work in the real world for real wages, good health care, a decent place to live – in short, what people most need is a chance to live an ordinary, everyday life, in ordinary, everyday places.

For the individuals supported by the new grant, the work of Community Opportunities staff will be to help them reconnect with community life. With the help of their microboard, they will have a chance to live in community, some of them for the first time in years. And for those who have lost their family and friends, the work will be to build a new story – a story of growth and triumph.

A chance to be known.

Stories held.

Stories told.

## Annual Spring Dinner

Please join us  
**Saturday, April 29th**  
Radford University West Campus

Dinner highlights to include...

\* *Delightful jazz by the  
Flip Shoemaker Trio*

\* *Fabulous food by  
Baker's Best Catering*

\* *Storytelling by  
Paul Sale & Thomas Hock*

\* *Silent auction*

Invitations will be mailed to our friends in the area. For more information, contact

Amy Tickle  
540-980-9001

## The State of the State for Virginia Citizens with Disabilities

- Chris Burton

As I write, the Virginia General Assembly is at work in Richmond. Citizens with disabilities, their allies and advocates across Virginia are fighting an uphill battle to push legislators to support budget and policy initiatives that help rebalance the system of services for people with disabilities from institutional to community-based services.

At a time when most states have already moved or are moving very quickly to transform the system of supports from an institutional to a community-based model, Virginia's efforts to move money and resources out of institutions and into the community are woefully inadequate. Consider the following:

- Governor Warner's outgoing budget currently before the General Assembly proposes funding to allow 149 more people to receive services in the community rather than in an institution or group-care setting. That sounds like a good thing until you learn that there are over 1400 people currently living at home who are on an urgent care waiting list. These are folks whose caregivers are aging or in poor health. Living in their homes in the community will no longer be an option for them unless they are among the lucky few who get the limited funding. Without additional money for community-based supports, the only families getting help to keep their loved one in the community are those who have dire, life threatening emergencies. Virginia does not have a waiting list, Virginia has a crisis list. Advocacy organizations across Virginia have proposed increasing funding to support 800

additional individuals with intellectual disabilities (once referred to as "mental retardation") or developmental disabilities in their communities.

- The budget currently before the General Assembly proposes replacing Virginia's large institutions for people with disabilities with "smaller" (300 bed) institutions. If this occurs (and it looks like it will), Virginia will have the distinction of being the only state in the entire country to construct an institution in the last 25 years. Investing these dollars in buildings ensures that Virginia will keep them full for the next 50 years instead of moving the people and the money into the community. Advocacy organizations across the state actively opposed these building projects and have advised that investing dollars in community-based supports is both the ethical and the fiscally responsible course. Most other states have already closed their big institutions, while Virginia is building new ones.
- Currently, 40% of dollars Virginia spends to support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities supports 5% of this population—the 5% who reside in Virginia's institutions. This is a gross imbalance of resources. The budget and proposals currently before the General Assembly may make modest improvements in community-based services, but will not make a significant impact on that fundamental imbalance of resources.

Advocates and lobbyists understand that politics is the art of the possible; what is possible in Virginia when it comes to transforming long-term community-based supports for people with disabilities is, at least for the present, abysmal.

## Board Briefs

### Comings and Goings ...

We are excited to welcome **new staff member Amy Tickle** to Community Opportunities. With extensive experience in fiscal and office management, Amy is filling a much needed role as Administrative Assistant.

Community Opportunities bids farewell to **Board member Michele Wolfert**. Michele's family is moving back to North Carolina. Her support of Community Opportunities will be missed.

### Featured Board Member – Melody Bizzell

A founding member of the Board of Directors, Melody has served as Board Treasurer since 2001. Melody's strong background in accounting has proven vitally important as she has provided fiscal guidance to the Board. Melody's passionate commitment to the disability rights movement and her own family have made her a tireless advocate. Melody teaches accounting classes at Virginia Tech, is actively involved in her church and, in spare moments, is an avid reader.



*Melody (L), with fellow Board member, Renee Brown.*

## Annual Update from Community Opportunities

### Highlights of Our Accomplishments

- Created non-traditional partnerships with three state and human services agencies, Central Virginia Training Center, New River Valley Community Services, and Wall Residences.
- Began circles of support for six people who are institutionalized or at risk of institutionalization.
- Continued to support people in the New River Valley through existing and new circles of support and microboards and expanded the geographic area we serve to encompass much of southwest Virginia.
- Shared our mission with others through our semiannual newsletter, spring dinner, fall concert and presentations to community organizations.

#### **Help us spread the word!**

Please let us know if you'd like us to make a presentation to your civic group, community organization, or faith community.

email us:  
MicroboardsNRV@aol.com

### 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.
- No government funding stream exists to support our work.
- This support is highly cost effective – our low overhead covers the wages of three part-time staff members, with smaller amounts budgeted for costs such as insurance, 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, churches, businesses and foundations for financial support.**



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