



CAREERS THAT *matter*

Meaningful Work, Stronger Communities

I would like to invite you to explore a career in Community Disability Services. We need you, your skill, and your passion.

Careers in our field are about helping people with disabilities to be the best they can be by contributing their talents and gifts to their work places, homes and communities.

It is also a place where you can contribute *your* many gifts and talents. The work is diverse, challenging and exciting; it is truly meaningful work that builds stronger communities.

This newsletter highlights some of the people who have a passion for this work and the type of work they do. If these ideas, people and actions inspire you, you can find more information on work in Community Disability Services at

www.communitydisabilityservicesalberta.com

As an introduction to this collection of stories, I will begin with my history in the field and how it has benefited my life and learning.

My Revelation

In the fall of 2001, I entered the Disability Studies: Leadership and Community at MacEwan College in an attempt to find a career path for myself. Before starting the program, I had many preconceived notions about what it would entail and had already made plans to move into another sector.

Fortunately, what I learned in the first few months shook me to the core and brought a whole new light to the world around me. Previously, I did not fully understand stereotyping, marginalization or the advocacy

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Learning more every day

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movement. I realized very quickly how little I knew about communities and lives outside of my own. This realization inspired me to learn more about my communities, the lives of people with disabilities and about myself. I soon knew that there was no other career for me; I wanted to work in the Community Disability Services sector.

Over the next four years, I completed both my Disability Services diploma and my Bachelor of Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies degree while working part-time in the field. Each year, I was presented with invaluable information. I developed a solid foundation of knowledge around community and the least intrusive means of support.

I learned an immense amount from the people I supported while in school, more than I could possibly describe. They taught me about compassion, perseverance and having a sense of humour (among many other things). I certainly learned to walk with my head high, despite what life throws my way. Now, I continue to learn each day from people around me and make every attempt to attend as many professional workshops as possible.

It was also during my college and university years that I built many relationships with both professionals and individuals accessing supports. I am truly honoured to have met so many incredible people who have helped and guided me along my journey.

I began to understand that relationships are the glue in the Community Disability Services sector. The nature of the



Shauna with a friend, Roland Ewasiuk

relationships is not relevant because it is the existence of the relationship that really matters. We are in a person-centred world, where every person has the capacity to have a positive influence on another.

With this knowledge in hand, I would like to extend a welcome to each and every one of you. Welcome to a community without judgement. Welcome to a community of eternal learning and growth. Welcome to Community Disability Services.

Shauna May

The passion that drives

Danielle Bryant is easily envied by others because she loves her job. After nearly 20 years of working in the Community Disability Services sector, she is still eager to go to work every morning.

As a supervisor in a supported living environment provided by Accredited Supportive Living Services (ASLS) in Grimshaw, Danielle is responsible for leading her team of staff as they help individuals live as independently as possible. She participates in the front-line work, which keeps her well connected to all the people receiving supports.

Danielle started working with people with disabilities at the age of 16, when she volunteered with Special Olympics. She was immediately “hooked.” Danielle’s interest grew stronger as she did volunteer work through her high school work experience program, babysat foster children and worked at a summer camp for children and youth with disabilities.

Danielle can pinpoint exactly what it is that she loves so much about her job — people.

She enjoys being with people, helping them to learn new things and become independent. She says it’s incredible when you’ve known someone for 15 or 20 years, and



Danielle encourages newcomers to the sector to try a variety of different settings. “Find what you like, what you enjoy, what your passion is.”



you’ve been able to see the person grow and change throughout that time span. Danielle loves the fact that you can make a difference in somebody’s life just by using a positive approach.

“It’s fun,” she says. “There’s freedom in this job.”

Another reason Danielle enjoys her career so much is that “you never know what you’re coming into” when you arrive at work each day. Put individuals accessing supports, families, friends and community support workers together and anything can happen. There is always a surprise component. Although this can sometimes make things difficult, Danielle insists “there is nothing else I would do.”

In the past, there were times when she would take a break and work elsewhere, but she always came back. She has always been fortunate to have

strong teams whether she is supervising them or not and she fully believes that “enthusiasm catches.”

Danielle has had offers to work in other positions within the sector, but is very cautious in what she will accept, or even consider. Her opinion is that, right now, her job is perfect and is exactly what she wants. She is not interested in taking on a more administrative role because she loves doing the front-line work and fears losing her “perception of what it’s all about.”

Danielle believes that most people working in the sector have a natural talent and knowledge about how to best support people in their environments. From working with infants in early intervention programs, to supporting seniors, there is such a range of work to do that Danielle encourages newcomers to the sector to try a variety of different settings.

“Find what you like, what you enjoy, what your passion is.”

After all, that is how Danielle found her niche and she doesn’t plan on going anywhere else any time soon.

Hard work rewarded

Erin Schlepp, a Community Support Services Manager at REDI Enterprises in Medicine Hat, developed an interest in working with people who have disabilities at a fairly young age.

Erin met children with disabilities in high school through a beauty culture program, followed by a work experience placement in an integrated school. These experiences convinced Erin to pursue a career working with people with disabilities. Following high school, she earned a diploma in Rehabilitation Services at Medicine Hat College.

During Erin's first year of college she accepted a paid position at REDI Enterprises as a Community Rehabilitation Worker. She continued her studies and prior to completing her diploma, received a promotion into a Community Rehabilitation Worker II position. She managed to juggle her post-secondary studies and her job while also attending many in-house workshops provided by her employer.

After completing her diploma, Erin accepted a full-time position as a Teacher Assistant. She supported children and teens who had multiple disabilities while maintaining a part-time position with REDI. After about four years



Erin Schlepp

she left the school system and moved to a part-time Team Supervisor position at REDI Enterprises, where she worked with adults living in both supported homes and independently. This quickly transitioned into a full-time position. Her job was to support people their home environments in addition to community and work settings. Over the next six years, Erin continued her full-time work while advancing her education through various in-services and courses offered inside and outside the agency. Her hard work paid off when she was offered a position as a Community Support Services Manager. She took on the role in July of this year.

Erin gives credit to two co-

workers at REDI Enterprises, Shawna Churchill, Community Support Services Manager, and Pamela Wagner, Associate Executive Director (and former instructor at Medicine Hat College), for mentoring and inspiring her.

When asked what advice Erin would give to newcomers in the field, she replied: "Do the best that you can do at all times.

"Be passionate about your job and enthusiastic with every new task you are assigned. Always be open to advancing your knowledge and skills through any courses offered.

"Work to improve the quality of life of each individual you come in contact with, whether the person is a co-worker or one of the people you support.

"The most important aspect of your job is to listen to people, even if they cannot speak. You must be open to 'really' listening to the wants, needs and desires of the individuals you serve."

This is invaluable advice coming from someone who continues to have a successful career.

Erin is emerging as a leader within the Community Disability Services sector. She is living proof that Community Disability Services offers a vibrant and rewarding career path for people who see themselves pursuing this profession.

THE LEARNING CIRCLE

What do you do when the individual you are supporting wants to plan a community project, participate on a committee, or learn skills to become a leader in his or her own life?

These are the questions three staff members at the Red Deer Learning Circle continually ask themselves. Their answer? Look at the person's interests, passions and skills and examine the community and the opportunities it provides.

The program, which is an initiative of the Action Group in Lacombe, opened its doors in September 2005 in Red Deer after being successful in Lacombe for seven years. The plan was to provide a place for individuals to enhance their skills and to develop new ones. By working with a variety of community groups to develop networks, the Circle provides opportunities and enables relationships to flourish.

Within the Learning Circle, individuals can participate in classes and activities that match their goals and interests. This enables them to make friends with people in the community who have similar interests and connect to their community in meaningful, contributing ways. Each and every class promotes skill-building in relation to the community in which participants live, work and play.

The Learning Circle is facilitated by three staff members, who provide support for about 20 individuals. The classes they offer include Advocacy, Community: Expand and Grow, Public Speaking, Special Interest Interviews, On My Own and Leadership.

The Leadership class is the basis of the program. Participants enhance and develop skills in problem solving, communication, assertiveness, relationships, dealing with change, and dealing with conflict and so on.

Individuals use the skills they enhance to participate in a variety of community projects or committees. Some of these projects were developed by Learning Circle participants themselves. Examples include the Giving Garden and the Community Wellness Fair.

People in the Giving Garden grow vegetables and donate them to groups that support the homeless. Individuals in the Community Wellness Fair each chose a community agency or business they believe promotes community wellness. They then co-hosted a

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Making Connections, Building Relationships

Now for the untold story

Calgary's Vocational and Rehabilitation Research Institute (VRRRI) is spearheading the creation of a museum exhibit that will feature influential Albertans who have made significant contributions to the lives of people with developmental disabilities. In 2009, the project team hopes to incorporate this exhibit for a four-month term into *Mavericks: An Incorrigible History of Alberta*, the new permanent exhibition at Calgary's Glenbow Museum.

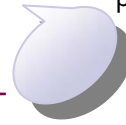
Inspired by *Mavericks* and by a Smithsonian exhibit on the U.S. disability rights movement (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights>), Jeanette Coombe came up with the idea of showcasing the history of persons with developmental disabilities in Alberta. She and co-worker Annaléa Sordi thought that a museum exhibit would be a very public and innovative way of telling this "uniquely Albertan history."

The province's history has yet to be told in a public and accessible way from the perspectives of Albertans with developmental disabilities. Jeanette and Annaléa want to tell this story in a way that engages the public, whilst creating awareness about the disability community. *It's My History, Too!* was born.

It's My History, Too! is in its first phase. The project team is requesting assistance from the developmental disability community to identify influential mavericks who have positively impacted the lives of Albertans with developmental disabilities over the last century. Mavericks can include, but are not



The idea behind *It's My History, Too!* is to showcase the history of persons with developmental disabilities in Alberta.



limited to, persons with developmental disabilities or self-advocates, family members and visionaries from the Community Disability Services sector.

The community is encouraged to submit nominations to the project team. A province-wide Exhibit Development Committee will then select three mavericks to feature in

the exhibit, along with a general historical overview of how individuals with developmental disabilities have lived in Alberta, from 1905 to the present.

The Exhibit Development Committee will also envision and design the *It's My History, Too!* exhibit. If you have an interest in the history of Albertans with developmental disabilities and museum design, you're invited to join this exciting committee.

A plain language website will soon be launched to facilitate interest and conversations among all stakeholders. This website will have up-to-date project information to tell the public how they can get involved. The website will enable the public to read stories and view photographs that Albertans with developmental disabilities and others in this community want people to hear, see and understand.

For more information about this project and how you can get involved, please contact Annaléa Sordi, VRRRI Researcher, at 403-284-1121 ext. 337 or asordi@vrri.org.

Flyers are available through VRRRI or at <http://groups.google.com/group/celebrating-action-in-the-loop>.

Making the connection between idea & action

Nearly two years ago, Ben Weinlick was faced with a challenge. As a Team Leader of Community Supports through SKILLS Society in Edmonton, he was often approached by support workers who understood much about the ideals and theories behind community connecting, but were unsure of how to actually begin the work with the people they supported. It was this common occurrence that inspired Ben to find some practical approaches to helping people who receive support to build unpaid, meaningful relationships within their communities. With encouragement from leaders at SKILLS, Ben formed a partnership with his colleague, Shauna May, and the two have been working on the project ever since.

After several months of research, an informal workshop was created. *Community Connecting in Action* began its life as a course that looked at how society marginalizes people with disabilities. It provided practical tools for support workers to begin not only getting the people they support "into" their communities, but also help them build bridges with others and become more "of" the community.

The workshop gained momentum and within the following year SKILLS asked for *Community Connecting in Action* to be shared with all SKILLS employees. So far it has been taught to 207 of SKILLS employees. The workshop continues to evolve as Ben and Shauna learn from the participants' insights, experiences, wishes and areas of interest.

Ben credits the success of *Community Connecting in Action* to the openness of the participants and to a simple but effective and creative problem-solving approach that addresses challenges staff face as they set out to connect with community. In the workshop, participants are encouraged to share



Ben Weinlick with his daughter Lillia

their own experiences, positive or negative, and have the capacity to receive feedback and ideas from their peers.

The time spent within the workshop has proven to be a mutual learning environment, as Ben has discovered. He has found that he learns as much from the participants as they do from him. He has come to realize that if you approach people and practice the attitude of "we're learning together," they will be much more receptive to what is being taught.

Ben recognizes that today's human resource challenges result in the people we support constantly having professionals come in and out of their lives. One of the long-term objectives of Ben's workshop is to help those we support gain natural, unpaid relationships within their communities so that staff turnover does not prevent people from living meaningful, connected lives. Although the sector is working towards finding solutions to the current human resource

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Connections

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crisis, Ben feels that it is imperative that we provide measures to assist people we support deal with the constant ebb and flow of professionals in their lives.

Although building community-based relationships is the core idea within Ben's workshop, he says there is not one specific way of doing so.

"Community, relationships, and connections are living and breathing," he says. "A dry, linear 'faultless' community connecting formula will probably only create more bureaucracy and barriers to people living real connected lives."

He cautions people from taking a community connecting tool and forcing it on all people they support while ignoring people's unique situations. Ben jokes, "That approach can be as ridiculous as forcing someone to use a hammer to paint walls, or using chop sticks to drink soup."

He believes that community connecting actions by staff and advocates must be as unique as each person they support and that workers may have to step outside of their comfort zones and "think outside the box" to help facilitate meaningful relationships for others.

Stepping outside comfort zones is not easy, so Ben encourages his colleagues to help one another create an organizational culture of support and learning where everyone at work feels safe to talk, learn and reflect critically on actions they and others take to connect individuals. Ben notices that regular, safe sessions of self reflection at which people can bounce ideas off trusted colleagues often enables a community connector to see a clearer, more beneficial path for facilitating connections for individuals.

The creative process encouraged through Ben's workshop has influenced the quality of supports. He has noticed that his colleagues now feel less isolated and they are requesting more time to come together to share their success stories. This sharing of experiences has proven to be beneficial to the morale of SKILLS employees, and thus reflects positively in the lives of the people we support.

Learning Circle participants share skills and talents

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special event with the Red Deer Public Library and had 14 different agencies and businesses attend. This event was open to the public and provided opportunities for the organizations to share information, which again promoted community wellness.

The other projects in which individuals participate are often pre-existing community programs such as the Graffiti Abatement Project, which is an initiative of the Red Deer Downtown Business Association.

Through these projects, and a variety of others, individuals are able to share their skills with other people and be valued, contributing members of their communities.

Although the Learning Circle is the starting point for many of these opportunities, it is the individuals who shine. They continue to challenge themselves and are becoming leaders. Through their project ideas and their determination, they share their skills, participate in events and work on projects within the community. This networking and building of relationships are what the Learning Circle is all about.

For more information about the Learning Circle, call 403-358-7816.

*Gina Belich
Program Coordinator
Red Deer Learning Circle Action Group*