February is a month that focuses on giving here in the Red River Valley. Many of our readers are familiar with Giving Hearts Day, a 24-hour day of online donating to local not-for-profits. As we geared up for our third year in Giving Hearts Day we began to think of ways people we work with have given of themselves, not in the form of a check or a swipe of a credit card, but of their time and energy. One of those individuals joined Freedom Resource Center staff at our volunteer booth at MSUM this month.

Jerry Richey found Freedom Resource Center while he was in a nursing facility in Wahpeton, North Dakota. “I had a severe seizure one day. I fell and hit my head. When I came to after time passed, I was in the hospital and I didn’t remember much.” Jerry told us. He was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury and transferred to the nursing home.

After a year had passed, Jerry was referred to our Nursing Facility Transition Coordinator, Raeane Varalrud. “Jerry’s plan was to find housing and employment in Fargo,” Raeane stated, “So we began the paperwork for his transition. I could tell he was getting anxious to move.”

Once in Fargo, Jerry was close to family and spent a lot of time with them. Beyond visiting with family, Jerry also began to attend events in his apartment complex. “I enjoyed all the time I was able to spend with family now, but I also wanted something to do because I was getting bored at times.” Jerry said. “I wanted employment, but because of my concentration and short term memory challenges because of my brain injury, finding employment has proven difficult.”

“When Jerry told me he was looking for things to do I suggested Freedom Resource Center’s Peer Mentor Program and volunteer opportunities we have, so I provided him that information.” Said Raeane. “Then, I made the referral to Justin.”

“Volunteering is good for me. It keeps me doing something and gets me out of my apartment.”

Freedom Resource Center’s Peer Mentor Specialist, Justin Kietzman, met and provided training to Jerry. “We talked about some of his interests and what he would like to do as a peer mentor,” Justin said. As is sometimes the case, the first match didn’t necessarily work out, but Jerry kept after it. Since then, Jerry has indicated he enjoys his peer mentor role. “Being a peer mentor, I hope I can help steer people in the right direction. Hopefully our conversations are doing something for them.” Jerry said.

Beyond providing peer mentorship to a number of individuals, Jerry has found other ways to help the people around him. He has assisted others who have utilized Money Follows the Person in the transition from a nursing facility to independent living, including a person who now lives in the same building as him. “Jerry is doing well and has been a great help.” Raeane concluded.

“Volunteering is good for me.” Jerry stated, “It keeps me doing something and gets me out of my apartment.”

Jerry has provided quality mentoring and continues to find ways to pay it forward. Recently, he has attended Freedom in Action,
From Where I Sit

by Nate Aalgaard, Executive Director

Overcoming Self Imposed Obstacles

When I was in high school I nearly flunked speech. I squeaked by with a D. At the time it seemed like the hardest class I would ever take. I just couldn’t seem to come up with topics I thought were interesting enough to speak about. I was stuck. Maybe it was a lack of self-confidence. I’m not sure why this happened, but it did.

Now, I have no problem going on TV, speaking on the radio, or addressing a large group. So how did this transformation happen? Ending up with a disability didn’t automatically make me a great public speaker. In fact, I had to overcome quite a bit of self-consciousness early on. I didn’t want people to stare at me and think I was all different. I frequently felt out of place and uncomfortable during the early days of living with a disability. Unfortunately I pretty much stuck out in a crowd, so there was no place to hide.

In order to do my job well, I decided that I needed to become more comfortable speaking in public, meeting elected officials, and talking to people about what we did. It was essential in order for the organization to thrive. It wasn’t easy. It took practice and time, and plenty of persistence. Gradually I got better at speaking and more comfortable talking to a variety of people. I realized that I was the expert on what I wanted to talk about, usually disability rights and Freedom Resource Center.

The key to all of this is my complete commitment to the cause of disability rights and what we were doing to further them in our organization. I could personally relate to feeling the sting of discrimination. I knew what it was like to sit across the table during an employment interview and realize there was no way that person was going to hire me because I was sitting in a wheelchair. I felt the burn of being excluded from businesses by architectural barriers. I also experienced firsthand the exclusion of people who went off and participated in all sorts of fun events and didn’t bother to ask me because they thought it would be too difficult to deal with my disability. I could speak from the heart about all these issues and what we were trying to do to change them.

We are in the business of breaking down barriers to independence. I know what that’s like in my personal life, and I see it in the people we provide services to through our various programs. We have board and staff members who are interested in talking about what we do. So here’s my shout out to our friends who may be reading this article. If you know of a group that would be interested in hearing about Freedom, please let me know.
A Letter of Gratitude

By: Diane Siekaniec

Growing up as a kid I was always seeking art in any form. At a young age I insisted on working with clay and glaze. The pottery process holds me captivated to this day. The need to create then, and now, is always burning, I was fortunate to become acquainted with an artist who invited me into his studio. This man became my mentor and taught me to treasure the gift within myself. My love for colors, shapes, and designs speak to my heart.

There is a sense of community that comes from the sharing, learning relationships among artists. Not to mention success, which I am extremely grateful for. I thank God every day for my talent, as it is my passion. It is what sparks me.

In grade school a teacher asked me if I was choosing the path of the artist and if I knew who Robert Frost was and if I was familiar with the poem “The Road Not Taken.” I told him I thought it was about choosing a career path. Many years later I found out that Robert Frost was referring to the path of the artist choosing him, and not that he had anything to do with choosing which path he took.

So it was with me. I did not make a conscious decision, it was always in me.

So I write this today with a depth of gratitude knowing how important art is in my life. Knowing all the people who helped me along the way--Art teachers, Family Friends. In my work at Freedom I am encouraged to use my skills and talents in the work I do here. Even though I am a private person I find it important to share my talents with the people around me.

I would not be where I am without other peoples’ help. I have a sense of responsibility to teach others to nourish and appreciate the gifts and strengths that lie within themselves and to mentor others no matter what your strengths and talents are. If you are a fisherman, teach others to fish. If you are a bread baker teach others to bake bread.

Everyone has strengths. Share them with your friends and family, and your community. If you are a gifted person; out of appreciation pass it on.

Diane and Nate at the ADA picnic

Diane teaches others in FIA

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Peer Mentoring Program Transition

In the year and a half he has been with Freedom, Justin Kietzman has built the Peer Mentor program to a level much higher than anything that has been done before. During the 2013 fiscal year, 52 new mentors were trained, 107 mentor matches took place, and 1,180 hours of mentoring were provided. All of Freedom’s mentors are volunteers, taking of their time to share personal experiences and insights with someone who is looking to accomplish goals toward independence.

Peer Mentoring is at the heart of independent living. It is people with disabilities helping each other; just like the founders of the movement did when they first started trying to live in the community, go to school, and work just like anyone else.

Justin has decided to take his talents elsewhere. He will be starting with the Southeast Human Service Center as a mental health case manager. Meanwhile, Freedom is looking for a dynamic person to continue the good work of the Peer Mentoring program.

What’s Wrong With This Picture?

Snow often covers the striping of accessible parking spots and access aisles. It is important to be mindful of access aisles year round for people with mobility challenges.