“One morning in December of 2007, I woke up sick,” said Laura Gerling. “Since then things have not been the same.” Doctors would attribute the change as a combination of fibromyalgia and depression. It is a combination that forced Laura to slowly give up after years of work doing what she loved, helping youth. Gerling was working as a College Registrar for Trinity Bible College, a position she held for sixteen years. “The hardest part was giving up helping others,” she said.

Laura, originally from Ellendale, North Dakota, had spent her life learning, teaching, and creating through writing until the change occurred. Beyond helping young adults navigate college courses, Laura taught elementary school in places as far away as Texas. Earning a Master of Arts in writing popular fiction, she continued to pursue a higher education working on a Masters for teaching and technology. That has been put on hold.

As time passed and frustrations mounted, Laura was receiving assistance. “I started giving up pieces of myself,” Laura said as she reflected on her past self-neglect. Gerling’s social worker eventually referred her to Diane Siekaniec at Freedom Resource Center. Laura expressed doubt after her first meeting with Diane. “I knew Diane would constantly push me to do things I wouldn’t want to do. I doubted I’d come back right away, but I did.” She said with a smile.

Laura entered Freedom’s services with the goals of getting paperwork in order, and to increase her strength and stamina that had diminished due to her disability. She has pursued those goals with the guidance of Diane, and has achieved so much more. Laura has begun to write again and gain back parts of herself.

Laura is working on her goals and working towards a better life.” said Diane Siekaniec Independent Living Advocate.

“The most important thing about Freedom Resource Center is their willingness to put tools in our hands along with the encouragement to use those tools.”

Laura has a new outlook on life as she continues her partnership with Freedom. Though she continues to work on overcoming her own barriers she begins to think about helping others again like she had done for so many years before her disability impacted her so greatly.

“I’m encouraged to continue on a productive path and I’ll continue to take the small steps of change like Diane and I discussed. My life now is what I make of it.” Laura continued. “I want to tell people you don’t have to live in the dark.”

The poem entitled “Shattered” (read in full on page 2) is one of her recent writings, which she presented publicly at the Art of Freedom on October 23rd. In it, Laura talks about damage and how some struggle while others embrace it. Kintsugi, the art of embracing damage. Laura describes kintsugi as, “Not hiding the fact it is broke; you’re highlighting it and embracing it.” While kintsugi is an art form it is easily translatable to people with disabilities and the mission of Freedom Resource Center.

“What’s Wrong With This Picture?”

• Shattered
• Art of Freedom
• From Where I Sit
• What’s Wrong With This Picture?
Art of Freedom

While some guests took to the arena to vote for the people’s choice awards, others took the time to watch live demonstrations in the lobby. Renee Graham demonstrated the art of acrylic painting as guests arrived at the front entrance. To Renee’s right was a stained glass demonstration from Freedom’s own Mark Bourdon. Also in the lobby was teachings of origami from Paula Sheets. Deb Richman was teaching others to weave in the arena and Board member Karen Aakre was showing how to spin.

As the night drew to a close and the votes were cast, it was time to announce the people’s choice awards. This year’s winners were:

1) David Dickson
2) Margaret Speer
3) Cathy Ragan

Making Healthy Choices
Freedom in Action
When: Wednesday, November 26
Time: 10:30 to 12:00
Where: Cass County Annex, 1010 2nd Ave. S. Fargo
RSVP to Cindy at 701-478-0459

Cooking 101
Freedom in Action
When: December 2nd and December 9th
Time: 1:00 to 3:00
Where: Community room, Law Enforcement Center, 413 3rd Ave. N. Wahpeton

Living Well 102 Orientation
When: December 9th or December 16th
Time: 1:00 to 3:00
RSVP to Cindy at 701-478-0459

Shattered
By Laura Gerling

The masses marvel at the surface perfect life, they condemn the broken.
As if being shattered were a choice.
As if the falling can defy gravity; an avalanche falling up instead of down.
There is no choice.
The process pain.
The soul is ripped; self-worth stripped
Shattered.
Fragments are gathered, hoarded, dismal reminders of “Once upon a time when,” the plaintive cries of, “If only,” the inevitable internal resonance of, “failure.”
Destruction is optional, remain in ruin; a victim of life and living, of circumstance or accident, that is what some do.
They hold the pieces until one by one they’re lost, and in the end there is nothing left to hold.
But others…
Others kintsugi.
Others gather the pieces, fitting them back together.
At first this is a futile task.
The pieces jumbled, the edges sharp, the wounds deep.
Then…
This.
This is the…
foot.
This can be built on this again.
Piece by piece, each in its place.
Work serves as the lacquer that holds each fragment in position.
When finished, gold dusted, we are refired. not in a kiln, but in crucibles.
From Where I Sit

As a taxpayer and citizen I have ownership of my city, state, and country. I have a responsibility to participate, and voting is one of the best and most basic ways to make my voice heard. I have fond memories of voting at our township hall in the first couple of elections after I turned 18.

Unfortunately many people with disabilities do not take advantage of that right. One study, “Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections,” report to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and Research Alliance for Accessible Voting, by Lisa Schur, Meera Adya, and Douglas Kruse, June 2013, examined this issue. Among their findings: Minnesotans with disabilities voted at a rate 8.4 percent lower than people without disabilities, and North Dakotans with disabilities voted at a 7.6 percent lower rate.

They found that many barriers prohibit people with disabilities from voting, including physical and communication problems at the polling site. They recommend increased attention to barriers, as well as easier vote-by-mail procedures and get out the vote efforts. They conclude that if people with disabilities voted at the same rate as people without disabilities, our political power would increase dramatically because of three million more voters.

Now for my voting experience. Since they became available a few years ago I use the Automark voting machine. It’s pretty slick. It has a touch screen for those of us with limited hand function. It has headphones and can read your choices back to you. The buttons have Braille.

In one of my previous visits to the voting site I asked the workers to turn the machine to the side so my votes were not in plain sight of others in the room. On another occasion I mentioned that the table was too low for me to get my knees underneath. This time, as I entered the voting room one of the workers came up to me and proudly proclaimed that the machine was all set up and ready to go. They had tested it out and it was working great.

Not so fast. After I finished voting I hit the print button to have the machine mark my ballot. It went for a few seconds and promptly stopped. Nothing happening. The election workers gathered around it and started pressing buttons—still nothing. A couple calls to the Courthouse ensued. Finally after about half an hour of messing with it, they figure out how to open the top of the machine and retrieve my partially-printed ballot. The few dots that it had filled in didn’t even match the ovals. So I had to vote again, this time by hand. One official offered to help me, which I declined.

After the election Freedom got a call from a constituent who said a particular polling place in Fargo had an access issue. Unfortunately by the time we found out about it the election was over. We could have gone there that day to check it out. This past summer I wrote a letter to ND Secretary of State Al Jaeger with a concern over the new voter identification law. I was concerned that people using public transit would not be able to easily get to and from the polling place to update their identification if they were turned away from voting. The Paratransit bus doesn’t operate like a taxi and you can’t just call for a ride whenever you want. They need at least a day in advance. So barriers do indeed exist. It is our job as disability rights advocates to work to eliminate them, including in polling places.
RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

“Helping people with disabilities live more independently for 25 years”

Go to www.freedomrc.org & click Donate with Impact

What’s Wrong With This Picture?

Each accessible parking space should have a sign. The access aisle appears to be 8 feet wide, so this could be a van accessible space. If so, in ND the space for the vehicle is to be 11 feet wide with a 5-foot-wide access aisle. While the ADA does not specify which side of the vehicle the access aisle is on, preferably for vans the access aisle should be on the passenger side. The ramp to the door is much steeper than 1:12.