The Mission of Freedom Resource Center for Independent Living is to work toward equality and inclusion for people with disabilities through programs of empowerment, community education and systems change.

We envision a society where ALL individuals are valued, respected and have equal opportunity, access, responsibility, and freedom of choice in all aspects of life.

Have you accepted your disability?

By Terryl Christensen - Information Specialist

For those of us who have a disability we must learn to accept this normal and natural part of life and realize how it affects each of us uniquely, while discovering what we should do about it. If we do not accept our own disability, how can we expect others to accept it? If one accepts his or her disability, they will then be able to assess the effect it has on their life. When accepting and adjusting to a disability, modifications may need to be made to reach goals. Assistive technology or other individuals’ help may be utilized.

The community accepts disabilities more readily if those who have a disability model acceptance and appropriate behavior. If one is always making apologies for their disability or excuses for unmet goals or responsibilities, then the community will have much lower expectations. Not only will the community not have appropriate expectations, but they will continue to have unrealistic ideas of what life is like with a disability.

Have you ever heard that people with disabilities cannot work? Or maybe that people with physical disabilities cannot maintain a job because they are “always sick”? Have you ever heard they are too costly for the company to employ? That they are not responsible? Perhaps you have heard that people with mental illness are “crazy” and cannot be trusted?

Or perhaps you are on the opposite end, hearing that it is “amazing” that you are able to go to work every day despite your physical disability. Or you are so “remarkable” to be able to go through school and maintain good grades despite your “mental condition.” Why is it so extraordinary that people with disabilities do the things that everyone else does?

So I ask the question – have you accepted your disability?

When a disability is affecting an individual and keeping them from accomplishing their goals there may be issues with acceptance. Some of the emotions that you may experience in relation to working through acceptance would be: anger, denial, bargaining, and grief.

Some ways to come to acceptance are to share your feelings and thoughts with others. Write out the limitations your disability places on you and how you can work around those limitations. Write out your goals. Get other people’s perspective on the situation and accept help from others.

Be good to yourself. Realize this is difficult and you may need to work through this process multiple times throughout your life. Take time to do things you enjoy and spend time with loved ones.

Once you feel you have accepted your disability, seek out ways to share. If you share and educate others, then the community as a whole will have a better idea of what your disability is really about. This community

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What’s Wrong with this Picture?
By Andrea Nelsen

This picture was taken at the State Capitol in Bismarck during our day at the Capitol. The box on the wall is the “letter box” where constituents can drop off letters for their representatives. As you can see, the slot for the letters is out of Mike’s reach and does not comply with ADA standards. In order to comply with the ADA Section 308.3.1, the reach height, “that be 48 inches maximum and the low side reach shall be 15 inches minimum above the finish floor or ground,” this goes to show that we need to remain vigilant even in our state capitols.

The Power of Language
By Tyler Axness - Communication and Policy Coordinator

Language and its use is an ever-changing way for us to express our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Each year, new words are being added to various dictionaries due to the fact people keep creating words or altering the meaning of those already established. What a word means and its intent one year may be vastly different in five years. After all, language is a reflection of the current state of affairs in which the culture you live in views itself. Some say the words you choose to use aren’t as important; it is how you use it that matters. Words are powerful. If there were true, there would be no need for professional wordsmiths, such as Dr. Frank Luntz, that are paid handsomely to tailor messages for CEOs and political candidates. These professionals ask an audience how they feel about one word versus another. An example of Dr. Luntz’s work is changing the wording of the “estate tax” to the “death tax” which raises different emotions among different listeners usually depending on your political perspective.

Words have the power to label experiences and people; they also have the power to impact our thoughts and perceptions. The words used to label people, our perception of that person may become distorted. For example, labeling someone as beautiful or ugly may increase the likelihood that others will view that person similarly. An example of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that language shapes our perception and in turn shapes our behavior. Studies have shown that people who are perceived as beautiful are treated inherently different from those perceived as ugly.

I’d like to take that premise and look at one word in particular, retard. Over the past century, the term has held numerous meanings, each changing with our changing culture. However, as the past has progressed into the current, the word retard has carried with it a negative perception. In essence the word retard radically dehumanizes individuals. As I stated earlier, words impact our thoughts. In this case, it negatively impacts a person’s self-esteem and self-image. We use what others say about us to create an image of ourselves. This negative perception was the top response from people we have served stating it’s the biggest obstacle facing people with disabilities path toward independences.

As a result of the negative emotion of this word, small acts of correction have developed in an effort to change the term we use. “People first language” has been at the forefront of the disability rights movement. Agnus of Fargo High school students have started a campaign in elementary schools known as “Spread the Word to End the Word” in an effort to stop children from using the “r-word.” In the State government of North Dakota, people first language has passed in both legislative chambers. SB 2142 changes “mentally retarded” to “intellectually disabled” in the state’s various laws that host the out-dated language. Referring back to the wordsmiths, when one is given the choice between “retard” and “intellectually disabled” the choice should become obvious as to which one should be universally accepted.

Again, words are powerful. We must be mindful of the words we use to describe experiences and perhaps more importantly describe people. Yet, know this; the meaning of a word is determined by the listener. Words we use may not seem or have the intent of being offensive, yet could cause someone ill feelings either about you or themselves. Therefore, take into account the situation, the company you are in, and most importantly retain common sense while expressing your attitudes and opinions.

Peer Mentor Spotlight
By Bobbi Munro

Freedom would like to recognize Brian Klein in this issue of our Peer Mentor Spotlight. Brian lives near Comorant Village, MN and has been very busy mentoring others in the past several months, which is why we wanted to highlight his outstanding work. He has been using a mouse with a track pad for mobility due to a a car crash and Oticon he endured 36 years ago from a snowboard accident. Shortly after this injury Brian was invited to visit newly injured patients at Sanford (then St. Luke’s Hospital) to discuss their adjustment to their disability. This interaction came from this. He has been monitoring various capabilities ever since.

Brian has been active involved with Freedom Resource Center since its early years. In addition to his peer mentor role, Brian has filled a maximum levy on our Board of Directors in the late 80’s through the early 2000’s, and is currently working another term on the Board. We believe Brian is thoughtful and dedicated to whatever type of activities he is working on. His personality is very bright, positive and fun. Brian has the ability to connect with people on their level and ask questions of them to help them feel free. These conversations are very meaningful for individuals who are facing such a life-changing time. He celebrates accomplishments with people, which builds a stronger relationship between mentor and mentee. Brian has recently been matched as a mentor for several additional individuals with new spinal cord injuries. Although he doesn’t like to take credit, he has been described as growing his independence. You do outstanding work. Brian is a great asset to Freedom.

Outside of his duties to Freedom, Brian is a farmer and he operates all types of machinery including tractors and combines. Again, he takes on his duties including supervising repairs and maintenance, developing adaptations to equipment, organizing the operations, and participating in animal management. Brian works a farm with his wife, as he can be completely independent in his environment. Brian is a dedicated fisherman. Among his hobbies are archery, rifle, and muzzle-loading for deer hunting.

A true Minnesotan, Brian is a Viking enthusiast and has driven cars as far as New Orleans, Louisiana and Cleveland, Ohio in the past. We have been to a game in Fawdon, Minnesota. He has also been a member of the North Dakota Wallaboys and Minnesota Ice Quad Rugby teams. (Remember “Murderball” the movie?)

We share all this with you for a couple of reasons. First of all, it is sometimes assumed that people who have spinal cord injuries, especially quadriplegics are unable to pursue activities that are physically demanding. Brian is an example of someone who get physically demanding. Brian is an example of someone who get physically demanding. Second, it further indicates the diversity of individuals who are served by Freedom. Are you ready.

New Employee
Diane Sekanec is Freedom Resource Center’s new Independent Living Advocate in the Fargo office. Her position will include assisting consumers set goals and develop strategies or how to achieve them. Her focus is on fostering accessibility and independent living skills. However, Diane is the most important factor in consumer empowerment. “Empowerment is such a large factor in our lives. I would like to work towards resolving employment issues through programs of empowerment and self-sufficiency.”

Diane is very involved in the community. She participates in the Art group, which displays her art. Her pieces can be found at Clara Barton School. In addition, she participates in a healing drum circle.

Originally from Moorhead, Minnesota, Diane has worked around the upper Midwest in the telecommunications field, held Northern Bell Telephone, which eventually became Quest Communication. Additional work experience came in the form of driving flower trucks and transporting railroad crews. She brings a wealth of people experience to her job. Prior to being hired, Diane was a peer mentor and Volunteer of Freedom. She was also appointed to the North Dakota Statewide Independent Living Council.

Please join us in welcoming Diane Sekanec to Freedom Resource Center!
Board Member Spotlight
By: Angie Bosch

Our Board Member Spotlight is Sue Pedersen. She comes to us with a wealth of experience and knowledge. Sue has been a board member since 2006 and has been actively involved in ratepayer programs as well as Freedom Resource Center committees. Without people like Sue, Freedom Resource Center would not be able to accomplish the great things we strive for in our community. Thank you for all your years of dedicated service! We appreciate you all.

Here’s Sue’s story in her own words:

I worked for the Home Depot as a Human Resource Coordinator in Northern California and Nebraska. I started out in Florida as an assistant manager, then I was promoted to HR Director in the Northern California region. Then we opened up the Northwest Stores in 1990. I became disabled with fibromyalgia - my arms and my legs kept going on me and I couldn’t drive or walk in the stores. The doctor said I had to quit working before I really injured myself or someone else. This was the hardest decision I had to make: going from working 70 to 80 hours a week and on a 24 hour call, to not working at all.

In 1993 I sold my condo, cashed in my stock options, and bought a house in Oklahoma City. Sticks from my sister. She had two daughters who could help me out around the house. I lived in the Social Security Disability and for 2 years until I finally got through and the judge backed that 13 years and I’m still here with Social Security. I lived in Oklahoma City for 3 1/2 years before moving back to Fargo. I moved in with my mom and dad when my dad got sick earlier. I told him, wherever he wanted to go, I went to him. In 2001, he became very ill and was diagnosed with cancer. He died five days later. Mom and I have been a team ever since.

In 2005 I was diagnosed with stage 3 cancer. I had to go through surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. Mom was there for me and I am grateful. In 2010, Mom had to undergo surgery, from which she is now recovering. We come from strong stock to keep going against all kinds of odds and lots of faith.

During my spare time I like to craft and things... always looking to try something new. While I was in Oklahoma City, I helped run a small craft fair at an church where all the proceeds would go to charity. I missed having a job, so I plan on having a little craft fair at church. I am also afav. Ball Club at Saint Mary’s for people with more good friends. My faith is very important to me. I go to Bible Study Fellowship on Wednesday mornings and I have taught preschool for 10 years. It is very rewarding and fun. Faith is very important to me. I enjoy taking care of my great nephews once a while. They help me go on long drives. My life has been a blessing and I truly believe God has guided me through my life and gave me comfort through the hard times as well as blessings in the good times. I do believe in miracles.

I am happy when I moved back to Fargo. They presented in a group that I attended for people with disabilities. I was struggling and Freedom really helped me find so many resources. They helped me find assistance when I didn’t have any medications, and I had no insurance. I am happy that I moved here. I wish there was something like this in Oklahoma City. I have enjoyed volunteering in the mentor program and serving on the board these last years. I truly look at things differently through the training in the leadership classes and the friends that I have met.

From Where I Sit
By Nate Aagaard, Executive Director

For this issue of the newsletter, we thought we would do something a little bit different. We have featured other issues such as accessibility, or employment, or civic engagement. This time we used direct feedback from the people who received our services during 2010. We call everyone who has received direct services from us at the end of the year to determine satisfaction level with their interaction with us. In addition, we ask them what they think are the top issues faced by people with disabilities. This time the people we surveyed identified stigma and negative attitudes they faced as the number-one problem.

I don’t imagine a lot of people have read the Americans with Disabilities Act—not even part of it. I don’t blame you. Most people really don’t care what laws say as long as they are there for the people who need them. Looking at the ADA, I found some very pertinent findings from Congress that they used as a basis for enacting our first comprehensive civil rights law for people with disabilities. Here are just a couple of the findings:

- The Congress finds that: discrimination against individuals with disabilities persists in such critical areas as employment, housing, public accommodations, education, transportation, communication, recreation, institutionalization, health services, voting, and access to public services;
- individuals with disabilities continually encounter various forms of discrimination, including outright intentional exclusion, the discriminatory effects of architectural, transportation, and communication barriers, overprotective rules and policies, failure to make modifications to existing facilities and practices, exclusionary qualification standards and criteria, segregation, and relegation to lesser services, programs, activities, benefits, jobs, or other opportunities;
- (This is my favorite one) census data, national polls, and other studies have documented that people with disabilities, as a group, occupy an inferior status in our society, and are severely disadvantaged socially, vocationally, economically, and educationally;
- the continuing existence of unfair and unnecessary discrimination and prejudice denies people with disabilities the opportunity to compete on an equal basis and to pursue those opportunities for which our free society is justifiably famous, and costs the United States billions of dollars in unnecessary expenses resulting from dependence and nonproductivity.

I generally feel that I’m pretty well accepted wherever I go. But once in a while, negative attitude rears its ugly head. A couple of years ago, our Board President Larry Chial and I decided to go have a little lunch at Bennigan’s restaurant in Moorhead. We decided we wanted to eat in the bar area. I’m sure there was a waitress at my game or golf tournament or something else to occupy us on television. We liked the thought of being in a different atmosphere than a pretty much vacant restaurant, so we asked the bartender if we could have them move a low table in from the bar, as we both used wheelchairs and all their high tables were no good.

She basically made a few excuses about how they couldn’t do that, which sounded pretty bogus to us. We emphasized to her that it was our right to sit in the bar if we wanted to, and that moving a low table in from the other area was not too much to ask. This went back and forth for a couple of minutes, and we were all getting pretty worked up about it. Finally, Larry and I asked to talk to the manager. She said something like, “You can, but you’re not going to like it.” We pretty much said, “Fine, bring him over.” A few seconds later the manager arrives and we politely ask for a low table. He says, “Sure, I’ll be right back.” So he slides one of the high tables away, slides the low table in, and says for us to have a nice lunch. Simple as that. Meanwhile, I started thinking, “I sure hope that bartender doesn’t sabotage our food.” I didn’t think she did, but she sure didn’t like that we had won that battle.

This is a prime example of us, as people with disabilities, not being given the proper respect we deserve. We are customers just like everybody else, and doing something as simple as moving a table, or installing the proper accessible parking signs, or having your waiters read the menu items to somebody who can’t see, is completely reasonable and within our right.

I imagine that’s how a lot of other people feel - like they’re just not accepted. They’re not the same as everybody. People with disabilities can instantly feel when they are being looked down upon and devalued. How can you expect someone to give you a job, or pay you the proper respect as a customer or a user of public services when the person on the other side of the desk has they are better.

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Legislative chambers are in full swing this time of year and if you’re like me you’ve probably been glued to news sites, television programs, or local radio talk shows to get up-to-the-minute updates for what is going on in our capitol. Ok, I’ll admit, most people aren’t like me and I may obsess quite a bit more than others over the legislative process.

However, if you are paying attention to the policies and opinions developing around us, you’ll notice certain patterns arising from the current legislatures in session. The pattern varies depending on what level of government you are observing and what geographical location you reside in. Allow me to take a few moments in the lines that follow to explain the patterns I’m seeing develop and express why. If you are not following or involved in this process, you should start, and fast.

North Dakota

North Dakota is the envy of the nation. We are amongst the top economically due to oil production and a strong global wheat market. The state government has a budget surplus, one of which is rarely uttered this day and age. Furthermore, a recent national publication named North Dakota one of the happiest places to live. All is well, and there is nothing to concern ourselves with, right? Wrong.

Let’s talk about the real issues, the issues that are difficult to find in the media and aren’t discussed outside of Bismarck. Why are we focusing all of our attention on the University of North Dakota’s Fighting Sioux logo instead of talking about the 19 percent increase of North Dakotans relying on food stamps to feed themselves and their family? Yes, in our booming economy, there has been an increase in people relying on food stamps.

Why are we focusing on what the state insect should be instead of making sure children living in poverty are properly cared for under the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP)? North Dakota is amongst the worst in the nation in guaranteeing impoverished children health care coverage. An amendment was defeated which would have raised the eligibility level to 250 percent of the poverty level. The current eligibility level is 180 percent of the poverty level, which still leaves about 11,200 children uninsured according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

How can we brag about a 3.6 percent unemployment rate while the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is roughly 63 percent according to the American Community Survey? On March 25th, the House of Representatives failed to pass a bill (SB 2331) that would have provided an income tax credit to businesses who hire someone with a disability. This bill, if passed, could have been a catalyst for change, providing individuals with disabilities a means to become more self-sufficient and less reliant on government aid to just survive. Yet, I haven’t seen this reported in any media outlets.

Why can’t we provide a property tax credit for disabled veterans (HB 1306) failed yet slash other taxes that people don’t even ask for? Why can’t we reinvest in our businesses, who receive over $100,000 dollars from the government, to have fewer doors making access easier for those with physical impairments (HB 1158)? Why is nobody talking about this? Am I the only one fired up about it?

Minnesota

As is well known now, Minnesota has a $5 billion dollar deficit, slightly better than the earlier projected $6.2 billion dollar deficit. As I mentioned in our winter newsletter, added revenue seems to be unlikely; therefore, in order to bring a balance to the budget drastic cuts are being proposed to services that assist many readers of this newsletter and recipients of Freedom’s services. A March 27th, article in the Star Tribune written by Bred Hartigan and Rachel Stassen-Berger stated the Minnesota House plans to slice $1.6 billion from projected Health and Human Services spending. The Senate adds another $200 million in cuts. Both budget bills focus on the dollars available to help poor, elderly, and disabled Minnesotans. Both legislative bodies are also proposing to repeal the early Medicaid expansion, which will leave 100,000 Minnesotans without health insurance.

Among the possible cuts from the state funds that Centers for Independent Living, like Freedom, rely on to provide much-needed services in our communities. If these cuts were to go through, it could mean a reduction in staff, delaying services to a large area in the state, or worse, could mean the closing of offices, which would eliminate our services all together.

This prompts me to wonder where the shared sacrifice is in these tough times. Why are we asking individuals on one end, those who have a connection with Freedom, to give up so much, in some cases their independence, their homes, and at the most extreme their well-being, and not asking individuals at the other end to give anything up? Why are proposed cuts aimed at individuals who rely on these services for basic survival? Why is nobody talking about this? Am I the only one fired up about it?

Federal

The Federal government is $14.2 trillion in debt as of this writing. Reforms to Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid appear to be inevitable. In some proposals, a near elimination of these programs has been laid out. Yet again, we are attempting to balance a budget on the backs of people who can least afford it? Why is it, those who have the least to give are asked to give the most, not merely out of their pocket, but in the form of illness, independence, and property? Why is nobody talking about building incentives into these programs that give people a more balanced choice, or an alternative way to become more independent while slowly weakening dependence on government aid? Am I the only one fired up about this?

Solution

I predict and hope, by this point in your reading, I am not the only one fired up about it. Are these current policy proposals and opinions due to the misperception that people who rely on these programs are lazy or are people who made poor decisions and want to rely on systems that hold them at a specific income level? Perhaps some is it. However, I haven’t met anyone associated with Freedom who chose to become disabled, who asked to become dependent on others for a fulfilling life. Some things are simply beyond one’s control, and it is how we as individuals and as a community respond to those instances that matter and make life something to be cherished. Why are we allowing the civil discourse to say that individuals should be punished for something they had no control over?

Are these policy proposals a response to dire economic circumstances? Of course some of it is. However, these specific policy proposals do not have to be the only solutions; there are many ways to resolve this man-made situation we find ourselves in.

My conclusion for why these proposals exist, the very proposals impacting the people associated with Freedom Resource Center is this: We allow it to be so. We are too silent when it comes to issues that directly impact us and the people we love. Nobody is talking about it, because we aren’t talking about it. Bills have failed in each legislature because nobody has testified explaining the impact it will have on them specifically. Senator Malmstrom from Fargo said that HB 1158, which failed, had nobody testify in favor of it in the Senate.

I worry that if I have fire up the very people needed to speak up today, readers of this newsletter and recipients of Freedom’s services. Small actions have the potential to make large differences. The Civil Rights movement started by small acts and culminated in sweeping changes. The Disability Rights movement started in similar fashion, with small acts. However, we are satisfied with where we are today, with unemployment in the mid 90s, inaccessible health care, and a lack of respect for the individual created by false stereotypes? Or can we continue to work until there is equal access to everyone of every age regardless of ability, and continue to be vigilant to make sure that access remains once it’s achieved? I choose the latter and I trust you do too. It takes perseverance and the willingness to be heard and fight for what you see as just and fair. It starts with small actions.

From Where I Sit

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than you? How can you expect to be treated equally when you look at you with fear, mistrust, or even disgust?

I eventually came to the conclusion that I needed to live the life I wanted, it’s not my nature to get into arguments with bystanders, or file discrimination complaints. But as time has gone on I decided that if I don’t want to accept second-class citizenship I have to do something. At Freedom, we are here to provide leadership to other people. And hopefully as time goes on, things will get better.