Some days you wake up and you never know what that day will lead to. You meet with a person in a place you’ve never heard of and learn about a few things that are completely foreign to you and think to yourself, “there’s no way I’m going to do that.” That is what Shelby Wolter from Breckenridge, MN thought and stated back in June 2015 when I asked her to join me and help me set up at one of our Freedom in Action (FIA) events. Shelby said that she “has what she considers to be social anxiety.” Shelby was in my office because her roommate made her come. Even though she was familiar with me, as we are related, she was still anxious. She said she was scared to be in groups and stayed home most of the time unless she was with her immediate family. After a few meetings with Shelby, she set goals to help her overcome her fears. They involved some outside agencies, Freedom Resource Center and most importantly, our Peer Mentoring Program. Shelby had been purposefully isolating herself except for her family and roommate and had few people she socialized with. Shelby was matched with a Peer Mentor by Paula Short our Peer Mentoring Specialist. Shelby’s Peer Mentor helped her come out of her shell, and she blossomed!

In August of 2019, Brooke Bladow from Hankinson, ND, came to my office with a family member looking for services for socialization and independence. Brooke said she thought, “What did I get myself into?” That feeling went away after she met her Peer Mentor Shelby; yes, you read that right Shelby became a Peer Mentor, “I feel like I can relate,” states Shelby, “and I know what to do and not do.” Shelby cites examples of going to a restaurant during the slow times and gently working their
way up to busier times. Brooke agrees, “that was good, now we can go almost anytime.” Shelby states, “except for Sundays, Sundays are bad!” As part of her goal, Brooke wanted to be able to come to FIA events. She was a little scared at first, but the feeling went away after Shelby came with her. Shelby is not always with her at FIA events, but Brooke still comes, I asked her about that and if she’s shy when she is there. She said “It’s getting better, knowing the people.”

Shelby and Brooke talked about the types of things they like to do together. They both agreed the most fun is “just hanging out and not eating”. Sounds about right for young adults. Movies are something they also like to do together. They did tell me about a picnic in the park on a rather windy day and sounded like they had a lot of fun, even with the wind; there are some inside jokes that we don’t get to know about. The one obstacle they have is finding the time to get together, they both work, are depended on and are very loyal employees.

When asked about being a peer mentor Shelby said, “The best advice I can give if you become a Peer Mentor is to take it one day at a time and try to view everything through their eyes. Being a Peer Mentor means I get to spread joy to other people, and I’ve learned to listen more.”

Brooke says, with a smile on her face, that if you want to have a Peer Mentor, “just ask an advocate or call one of the offices, everyone is so nice, so you don’t have to be scared, I’ve learned to not be so shy, since having a Peer Mentor.” She agreed that her goal has been accomplished.

From Where I Sit
By Scott Burlingame

I am very honored to be asked to write this article as Nate Aalgaard is recovering from illness. To me, Nate will always be my boss, my mentor, and my friend. I hope to use this opportunity to share some of his wisdom.

Nate taught me an important lesson early on in my career. He told me even though independent living centers serve people with all types of disabilities, those with invisible disabilities will often face a whole different type of discrimination. He said, nobody would look at him and question he had a disability.

However, the experience for people with invisible disabilities is often very different.

I am a person who lives with two types of invisible disabilities. When I was in school, I received special education services for a learning disability, and for most of my adult life, I have lived with depression and anxiety.

The last 20 years I have been open about my learning disability. I am a horrible speller, and as a result, I have made a few embarrassing mistakes along the way. Nate has always been quick to remind me, I even spelled my name wrong on my resume.

I faced a lot of professional barriers as a result of my learning disability. I once had somebody tell me my disability meant I lacked the ability to understand complex situations. Somebody else informed me my disability meant I could never be an Executive Director of a Center for Independent Living.

Talking about mental health publically was much harder for me. I worked as a disability rights advocate for 18 years before I ever publically wrote or spoke about my depression. I kept it a secret for far too long for the same reason many people do, I was fearful of being judged and for being seen as incapable of being a successful professional.

I am a lifelong disability rights advocate, talking about this should be easy for me. The independent living movement believes all disabilities are a natural part of being human. We exist to remove barriers that keep people from living full and complete lives in the community of their choice.

Unfortunately, far too often people with disabilities, like mine, feel we have to explain not only our disability, but also explain how we can still be a valuable member of society.

I think we can do a lot better at creating a society that is a little more inclusive to everybody.

Scott Burlingame worked at Freedom Resource Center from 2000-2010. Since then, he has been the Executive Director of Independence, Inc., a Resource Center for Independent Living, serving the Minot region. He is also currently the President of the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL), a membership organization concerned with the independent living issues of people with disabilities living in rural America.

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Meet our Board Members

Kari Klettke lives in West Fargo with her husband, 2.5 year old son, Kole, and dog, Phoebe. She also has two older stepdaughters that live in Perham, MN. Kari took over as the Director of Accessibility Resources at Minnesota State University, Moorhead, after Greg Touges retired, but recently accepted a new position as the Director of Career Services at Valley City State University and starts there at the beginning of January. Kari has also worked as a disability specialist in Disability Services at NDSU, and as a counselor at Vocational Rehabilitation in Fargo. She also has many years of experience doing various roles (counseling, teaching, advising) at several colleges, both 4-year colleges and community colleges.

Kari has referred many past students and clients to check out the assistance Freedom Resource Center can offer, and believes it is a wonderful resource that everyone should know about!

Sherry Bjornson lives in South Fargo. She is the widow of Keith Bjornson, who died in November 2018. He was a former Freedom Resource Center Board Member and devoted much of his life to raising awareness for the needs of people with disabilities and accessibility rights. Sherry has had Cerebral Palsy since birth and is not a stranger to disability issues. She welcomes the opportunity to carry on Keith’s legacy and develop her own voice in advocacy. She served as a Freedom Resource Center volunteer for the past 10 years, in the Peer Mentoring Program. She is a mother, sister, aunt, great aunt and has a strong presence within her family and community. She is a longtime member of Atonement Lutheran Church. Her pastimes include reading, knitting and praying. She is a lady of faith and chooses to count her blessings.

Meet our Staff

Hi, my name is Paula Short, many of you know me as the Peer Mentoring Specialist at Freedom Resource Center, but I am much more than that. I am a wife, married to my husband Terry for almost 34 years, a mom, we have 2 daughters and a son in law, a Grandma, 2 granddaughters 6 and 4 and a grandson just born December 9th and 4 grand dogs.

I have been at Freedom Resource Center for close to 4 years, time has flown by, never a dull moment here. I work with a great bunch of people who all have the same mission in life, helping others. I have loved getting to know the current Mentors and Mentees and adding new ones to our Freedom family.

I spend my time off baking, gardening, canning and making jellies with my husband in the summer and fall months. The time I value the most is spent with family and spoiling my grandbabies. Grandchildren help us slow down and appreciate the most important things in our life, and all they ask for is our time and our love. What could be better than that? One blessed lady right here.

What’s Wrong With This Picture?

Horizontal grab bars need to be added on the side wall and back wall of the water closet. All grab bars are to be ¼ to 2 inches in diameter. The vertical grab bar’s diameter is 1”. It is too small and should be replaced. The toilet paper dispenser should be moved so it is 7 – 9 inches in front of the bowl. The flush control should be on the open side of the tank, not the wall side. The garbage can on the side of the water closet should be moved to provide room for a wheelchair user.
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