



# Reaching Out

A portrait of Social Network Facilitation in Canada

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*for citizenship & disability*

PLAN Institute is an international source of inspiration, information, innovative ideas and demonstrable solutions relating to community, citizenship and disability. The Institute provides training, consultation, research, publications and organizational support related to family leadership, social network facilitation, social enterprise, caring citizenship, dialogue and social sustainability. To find out more about PLAN Institute please see our web site: [www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)

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## FORWARD

Fifteen years ago, fuelled by the conviction that isolation and loneliness were the biggest challenges faced by people with disabilities, my colleagues and I set out to create personal networks for members of PLAN. From those early days with their fragile beginnings we have seen the personal networks of PLAN members grow and mature. They have inspired an even deeper conviction in the power and potential of social networks to transform the lives of people who are vulnerable and strengthen their communities.

While we have not found a short cut to meaningful relationships we have discovered some ways to avoid roadblocks and sustain ourselves over barren patches on the journey. Much of our work is now focused on providing road maps for others to find the hidden pathways to friendship and contribution that exist in all our communities. PLAN's approach to the facilitation of social networks is now being replicated in over 40 communities around the world.

'Reaching Out,' Nancy Rother's portrait of social network facilitation in Canada, is one of the clearest, most practical guides in support of this work that we know of. It is filled with the wisdom of individuals, families and facilitators from all walks of life who are engaged in network facilitation. The seven elements of resilient networks that Nancy identifies are like trail markers on our journey. Each marker reminds us that others have been here before us and reassures us we are on the right path to end the isolation and loneliness of people who live the margins of our society.

We intend to keep learning and writing about facilitation and social networks. We would welcome your comments, questions, suggestions regarding this publication and recommendations about resources you have found valuable. Please contact us at [planinstitute@plan.ca](mailto:planinstitute@plan.ca) . We would love to hear from you.

Vickie Cammack  
Executive Director  
PLAN Institute

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the hundreds of people who eagerly participated in this study. Throughout our travels in the five regions of Canada engaged in this portrait, we were met with a most hospitable welcome. People generously shared their time, their homes, their food, their ideas, their frustrations and fears, and their poignant longings for a better future that would be found through relationships. We came to them to study and learn what they were doing, but people seized this opportunity to dialogue, reflect and to build their knowledge. In the process they strengthened their communities and renewed their energy. We have been inspired by their work, their stories, and their most genuine desire to develop their knowledge and skills.

It is our hope that this report will be a useful addition to this mutual exchange of support and inspiration and will help sustain us all through this precious work.

# INTRODUCTION

*I've had no relationships but I'd like to get one. Like any other person on the planet I want to feel that my opinion matters. I want to have a friend. It doesn't mean that you have to be someone who you're not. I like this idea. This gives me hope.*

*Kenneth, Edmonton*

## **The Legacy of Isolation and Loneliness**

The planting of an idea – like a seed in the ground – is a hope expressed. And so the possibility of getting one relationship, having a friend, offers hope. Hope has been building for people who are vulnerable and their families and it is to be found in the many communities across Canada working to develop intentional social networks. These networks address a most pervasive and disabling aspect of their lives –isolation and loneliness.

All of us need to belong, to make contributions which are appreciated and acknowledged and to experience love and caring which flows from relationships. This gives meaning to our lives and positions us firmly in the role of citizen. Relationships are the key to citizenship because full citizenship can only be achieved when we are recognized as contributors. It is through relationship that our contributions are given an opportunity for expression and recognition.

Full citizenship for people who are marginalized has remained elusive. The wheels of our society continue to be stuck in the mud of an historical paradigm which labels people on the margins as broken, needy and/or having little of value to contribute. As recipients of social services the lives of many vulnerable people have been dominated by paid and professional care. In missing opportunities to be in loving and reciprocal relationships, people living with disabilities have also gone missing from the life of community.

Moving from isolation to membership takes hard work and a conscious effort, but therein lies the hope for change

## **A Growing Momentum**

There has been a profound shift in our understanding of the importance of relationships in the past 30 years. Societal concerns about how socially fragmented and separate we have become have brought renewed interest in the social support that comes through having a network of caring relationships. Studies in both social and physical sciences provide lots of evidence to show that the quality of our lives is powerfully influenced by

the extent and quality of our relationships. We have more opportunities for citizenship, education, employment, good health and money when we have social and civic engagement.

For the past two decades this growing awareness of the importance of relationships for people who are vulnerable has led to numerous initiatives in the facilitation of social networks. While many attempts have faltered in response to the time required and the complex difficulties relationship building presents, others have matured and flourished. Today there are resilient and sustainable facilitated social networks across Canada. They are generating bonds of friendship and caring that unite and benefit all members of the network.

## **Reaching Out**

In January 2004, Plan Institute for Citizenship and Disability began an eight month project to discover and study the pockets of work – the repositories of hope – being done to facilitate social networks. Our ultimate goal was to support and promote the work of network facilitation by drawing on the rich experiences of people who have been doing, thinking and reflecting about this issue, so as to continue to build a solid understanding of social network development and to share that understanding with others.

## **Developing a Portrait**

Our intent was to develop a *portrait* of facilitated social network development across Canada. We engaged with families, service providers, and friends. We met and spoke with over 400 people in kitchens and living rooms, church basements, offices, restaurants, and even in the foothills of mountains; we talked with people at large and small regional gatherings, social network gatherings, individual and small group meetings, and by telephone.

We consulted with people in eight provinces, chosen for their experience and involvement in social networks facilitation on behalf of people who were vulnerable – people with developmental and/or physical disabilities; seniors; youth; and people with mental health concerns. As our work progressed, the list of potential resources seemed to grow exponentially as many individuals and groups previously unknown came to our attention. Knowing of the ever-expanding numbers involved in this work adds to our collective excitement and confirms that, indeed, momentum is building. It has been an inspiring journey of discovery.

People shared with us the barriers, the challenges and the joys around network facilitation; the good things people were doing, and what people were learning from the process. The creative and inspiring solutions that people have brought to this challenging work revealed to us seven critical elements in creating and sustaining social networks for people who are vulnerable. This report is based around these seven elements, exploring challenges and offering practical tips for each.

## How to Use this Report

This report is for people involved or interested in social network facilitation: families, individuals at the centre of network building efforts, facilitators of networks, network members, service providers, and the community at large. Each chapter addresses a particular element of a resilient social network: Hospitality and the Art of Asking, Listening Well and Always, Pathways to Contribution, Reciprocity, Letting Go, Creative Collaboration, and Facilitation.

Individuals can use this report to learn about how people experience the benefits of networks; how they understand and seek to diminish the challenges and barriers to this process; and strategies which support the network building process.

Family members, facilitators, network members - might want to gather together to review the report chapters or to examine chapters of interest so as to compare and share their experiences and discuss the merit of the strategies suggested.

Service providers will find this report of interest as they consider ways in which to recognize and promote the importance of relationships in the lives of the people whom they serve and might find use for the strategies suggested for working collaboratively with individuals, families and groups involved in network building.



# CHAPTER I

## HOSPITALITY AND THE ART OF ASKING

*Kathe and Jake reluctantly decided to invite people to form a network around Margaret. Kathe asked me, "Where will we get the people to do this?" I suggested inviting the church choir to a meeting. On the appointed night, the living room was filled with people. All of the members of the church choir had come. Yet Kathe leaned over and whispered, "I don't think we're going to get any people to help us."*

*Tom, Lethbridge AB*

*Asking for help.* So few words. Such enormous implications. The need to extend the invitation – and to do so continuously – is clearly recognized as a critical element in developing the network and ensuring its sustainability. However the reluctance and fear that comes with asking for help was experienced by virtually everyone involved in this study, affirming that anxiety associated with asking is a commonly shared obstacle to social network development.

### **The Challenges**

Reaching out to others reveals our vulnerability. It can bring out feelings of failure (*"Why isn't my family more involved?"*); it intensifies the extent of a person's isolation (*"I don't have any friends to call upon"*); it raises fears of losing control (*"I don't want strangers telling me what to do"*); and for many, it results in a feeling that they are imposing on others. As Kathe and Jake's story illustrates, these fears can prevent us from seeing the possibilities sitting right in our living rooms.

Even in situations where a third party – a facilitator – is doing the asking, the fear can exist. Facilitators hesitate mainly for three reasons: they are not experienced with asking, they are concerned that the invitation won't be accepted, they are unclear about what they are asking for.

### **There is Honour in the Asking**

*My husband didn't want to ask people to get involved with Jeff. I think he was embarrassed. He agreed to let me go ahead anyway. I must admit, I was surprised that everyone I asked said 'yes.'*

*Megan, Nelson BC*

Almost everyone in this study experienced the same surprise as Megan. Most people say yes when they are invited to participate in social networks. We have learned that when asked people are interested and willing to join in. Individual network members often told us how honored they were to be asked. Asking says to people, we value and are interested in you. Today many people in our communities are seeking meaning and

belonging in their lives. An invitation to participate in a network is an opportunity to join with others in this quest.

## **Re-Framing our Thoughts about Asking**

*Frances gets it. She does not feel like she is imposing and has no trouble asking. She is an amazing woman. She has tremendous insights born out of over 70 years of living. She tells great stories about the past. I see her as a giver of a gift of time and the time I spend with her is so valuable and enjoyable.*

*Carla, Calgary AB*

It's time to re-frame our thoughts about asking. Although we cannot extend the invitation by telling and listing for individuals all that they would gain from participating in this network, the key is in the knowing and truly believing that for many, this will be their experience. It represents the passion underlying the invitation – a spirit which compels us to ask without the layers of apology and reluctance. It begins with the value which we – the askers – attach to the person at the centre, the appreciation we have of what they could contribute.

## **Where to Begin**

There are various ways to extend the invitation to join a network. Three avenues are identified below which represent those most used by the individuals, families and organizations surveyed for this portrait.

### **1. Mining the Life Landscape:**

#### **(a) Identifying who is there**

*We did a social inventory of our life and that of our son's. We had a whole whack of names. It was overwhelming. If we had invited everyone, we'd have had to rent a hall.*

*Dave, Kelowna BC*

Taking a look around to see who is in your life – without pre-judging who we think will or won't say yes - but merely who is in, is a first step in identifying whom to invite further in. Throwing open the address book, flipping through the *mental rolodex*, looking at old photo albums, creating a relationship map of the places and people you bump into each day, are all valuable acts of looking around and back which often reveal surprisingly large numbers of people.

*We took a risk asking the daughter of friends, who played with Theresa when they were young. We discovered that she had fond memories of us and that we were a support to her then and didn't know it.*

*Cathy, Kelowna BC*

Considering past relationships of a family and individual often reveal individuals who welcome the opportunity to reconnect. Considerations of who is important; who has been a “champion” or has been there in the past; who you would like to know better, who sits beside you at church, can lead to a substantial list of names of potential network members.

**(b) Looking Around and Side to Side**

*I was surprised when a cousin of Catherine’s asked if she could live with her. As a result, she brought her parents and brother – our family – back into our lives. It was magic.*

*Nicola, Winnipeg MB*

Consider individuals who are on the sidelines: friends of siblings, siblings and children of friends, long-term service providers to family (for example, massage therapist, hairdresser, or grocery store manager) and extended family. Even though these people may not be central, they have been around for a long time, and a connection of a particular nature already exists.

Thinking multi-generational is relevant for everyone. Seniors, for example, may have a dearth of friends their own age. A connection with the younger generation can be invaluable over time.

**(c) Former Staff**

*I was happy to have the opportunity to be in a different kind of relationship with Theresa – not to be the one who said “no” all the time.*

*Kyla, Kelowna BC*

Many people we spoke with gave examples of former staff who are now key members of a social network. Often they even took the initiative and asked to join a network. These service providers were eager to form a new kind of relationship with the individual. Former service workers should not be ruled out as potential network members, especially for individuals who have spent a good part of their lives being supported by services.

**(d) Network Members**

*I invited Renée - a daughter of a friend – into the network. She is very kind and gentle. The way she helped by taking me to my chemotherapy appointments made me think that this would be a good idea.*

*Elizabeth, Ottawa ON*

A ripple effect emerges once the dots become connected and a network begins to form. People in the network naturally provide connections to individuals they know and to the broader community. When people we know introduce their friends to the network there is already a trust connection expediting their acceptance.

## **2. Identifying Connectors to Broader Community: Linking to Sustaining Places:**

*When our Pastor organized a Support Circle Workshop for the congregation, I was amazed to find a room full of people on a Saturday morning, many I did not recognize. When we went around the room and asked people “Why are you here?” many responded, “Well, I was invited.”*

*Irma, Winnipeg MB*

The goal of identifying natural community connectors is often two-pronged. One is to find a person who can create opportunities for an individual to know and be known by many different people. The other is in finding welcoming places where an individual can participate, contribute, and by being a member, have an opportunity to meet people and develop important friendships. Some of the more obvious sources are well-established service clubs; civic and ethnic associations often considered to be at the heart of community and filled with natural community connectors.

Throughout every region in this study, faith communities were identified as rich resources. Pastors, ministers and rabbis, for example, have the ability to ensure a full room by simply extending the invitation. Not everyone stays but sometimes people remain for reasons beyond merely being invited. The answer to the question, “why did you come?” is often different from the answer to the question “why did you stay?”

## **3. Creating the Welcoming Place: Being Hospitable**

*A few times a year we have an open house party and invite people we encounter in our daily lives. We invited some of the bus drivers on Andrew’s route, really not thinking any would come. But one bus driver came and stayed for over an hour! We had a really good talk. As a result, he tries to ensure that a low bus is always on the route during a time when Andrew typically uses the system.*

*Barbara, Lethbridge AB*

Offering hospitality is a means of getting people together that acknowledges and honours the person being invited. Connecting to the broader community by being neighbourly – sometimes by merely throwing a Tupperware party - and extending ongoing hospitality was a strategy identified to welcome new people and to sustain the on-going involvement of network members.

*We make wine in our basement, have BBQ’s and feed people in order to create an informal way to meet. Initially the people we invited to be in Jim’s network were our friends. They naturally brought along their kids and eventually the kids initiated with Jim on their own.*

*Karin, Saskatoon SK*

Not all invitations need be specifically centred on joining a network. Hospitality is an entry point that allows the invitee to see the person at the centre in a natural light.

*We always extended invitations into our home – seemingly nothing more than that. And so we consciously worked to create a gathering space that would be attractive to Bethany’s peers at school. We became the place where everyone wanted to hang out.*

*Barbara, NS*

For young people in particular, extending an invitation to peers to gather at the person’s home to play games, watch movies and eat pizza is a strategic effort to create a welcoming space and a potential and steady stream of traffic.

*One of our challenges in L’Arche is that assistants come from afar and eventually return home. But our core members have become good welcomers. They know that they bring something important to a relationship, no matter how long it lasts. They receive people into their lives with the spirit of joy...and then send them off with that gift.*

*Beth, Toronto ON*

Being hospitable is not all about parties and food. These tangibles are the tools that we use to convey and sustain the culture of good welcome through which people can receive the intangible gifts of relationship. Hospitality is the arm that extends and receives invitations. It is an essential spirit in creating sustainable networks.

## **The Pragmatics of Extending Invitation**

*There’s a huge difference between saying to a friend or acquaintance, “My parents are dying and I could really use your help in taking care of my brother” and saying, “A few of us get together to shoot some 8 ball and drink beer on Thursday nights...would you like to join us?” As we’re learning to shift our focus toward finding enjoyable things people can do together, our concerns about asking for help are becoming less relevant.*

*Jeff, Winnipeg MB*

The way in which an invitation is extended is linked to supporting the sustainability of involvement. Being clear about what we are inviting people into is important. As with any introduction, how we frame the invitation and how we introduce people to one another has an impact on how an individual will receive and consider the invitation.

## **An Invitation to Be Involved**

*The essence of community development is getting people together. What happens after that is often serendipitous. Let the community do it and see what happens. Let the community form the agenda and move it forward.*

*Mike, Winnipeg MB*

An invitation can be generic – come to a party, a dinner, or a BBQ – or for a specific request, such as driving an elderly person to a doctor’s appointment, for example. For

others it's an opportunity to apply the "Dinner Party Philosophy," that is, pull together people you think will be compatible and who would enjoy coming together.

## **An Invitation to Get to Know Someone**

*I invited Adam to a network gathering because I thought he might like Michael. They both love to listen and talk about music and they both share a dry sense of humour.*

*Annie, Montreal QC*

As Annie's story illustrates, she wasn't expecting Adam and Michael to hit it off; rather, she was hopeful. And she probably had a feeling, or hunch that the common interests shared could result in another meeting and perhaps an invitation to join Michael's network.

## **An Invitation to Join a Network**

*I hope to start a support circle so that I have more people in my life to help me make decisions.*

*Judith, ON*

Even in situations where individuals and families feel surrounded by people who would "be there for us," there is recognition of the need to intentionally bring people together in order to make connections. In these instances, the invitation to join a network is the clearly expressed intent. Sometimes people might be asked to attend three meetings before deciding if they want to continue. Sending letters, written or verbal invitations which state explicitly that a network is being formed can begin this pulling together process.

## **Conclusion**

Taking the courageous step of gathering people together is the first in the development of community. It is through the gathering that the "magic of engagement" can be experienced. As one parent exclaimed "Maintain the belief that you will be surprised."

## CHAPTER II

### LISTENING WELL AND ALWAYS

*After years of attending meetings together with my son – with schools, hospitals, social services and lawyers – I was surprised to hear Johnny so impressed with this meeting that he would describe it as ‘great.’ When asked why this one was different, he said, ‘This is the first meeting where people listened to me.’*

*Lillian, Lethbridge AB*

#### **A Safe Place to be Heard**

Many people who are vulnerable and their families are used to talking at meetings but they are less used to feeling that they have a voice. Although seemingly obvious, listening is an ongoing process critical to knowing who people are, what their experience has been and what and who is important to them. The act of listening is part of a process of building a safe place where people’s voices can be heard and heeded and where desires can be developed, expressed and changed. It is about building trust and it is critical to the facilitation of sustainable networks of relationships.

#### **The Challenges**

*At first I thought that it was all about my sick, dying parents. But as I saw people helping them, I got the confidence to speak up about myself. Now I realize that the network is for the whole family - we all have things to look forward to again.*

*Alison, Montreal QC*

True listening is a hard skill to master and establishing a culture where everyone is listened to – including network members – takes time. In our need to do and get going – often because of a crisis – we can neglect to take the necessary time to build trust and create the safe place where dialogue, emotions and honest expression are nurtured. Like the slow food movement ([www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)) where a meal is gradually shaped from the ground up, people must practice slow, sustained listening in order to ensure that the essence of emerging truths and desires will be revealed and ultimately honoured.

#### **Listen to the Struggle**

*Sean has had so many hurts in his life. He was subjected to such cruel teasing in high school. And then being placed in a special education class made him feel like a loser, an outcast. With each new program and promise that the system would offer us, all that was ever in my mind and heart is that someone would see him as I do – and like him.*

*Corrine, Montreal QC*

Taking the time to listen to someone's struggle allows us to understand what makes them vulnerable in life and what will safeguard them. It can also provide an opportunity for people to come together to create the collective picture of what life has been like. People surveyed for this study all spoke of the impact of listening to and sharing an individual's life story. The process creates awareness and empathy which build trust, deepen connections and nurture commitment.

## **Listen to Construct a New Story**

*When we created a Life Story with Cecille, she sent letters asking people to mention some of her gifts and the gift of their relationship together. Cecille had spent many difficult years living in an institution and had lost contact with a lot of her family. She received a slew of responses – one which led to a family reunion which became a regular event. Most important for me was to see that all of the responses highlighted the same gifts, even those which came from former workers in the institution.*

*Rebecca, Ottawa ON*

When we look for gifts rather than deficiencies, we find them. Taking the time to listen and get to know someone is an important opportunity to gain a new perspective – that of capacity, strengths and gifts. Getting to know someone through the lens of capacity and rejecting the negative legacy of the past is part of the creation of a safe space where people feel recognized and valued for who they are and what they contribute. From the senior whose identity has become wrapped in that of care giving or receiving to the youth who has become known as difficult, listening to them as people with interests, gifts to share and potential to realize their dreams is critical.

## **Listen to Create a Vision of the Future**

*I wanted a network so I could make friends and have people who could help me lose weight and find a job. Some goals have been underachieved, but that's life I guess.*

*Lyle, Vancouver BC*

People often have strong insights into their needs but require an opportunity for those needs to emerge. A vision is shaped through experience, and emerges from, rather than precedes, action. Spending time to create a shared vision helps people who may be involved to cast aside their assumptions and explore possibilities.

Networks formed during times of crisis often take a fast track as people experience a push to fix the situation. But time is essential for authentic listening to occur. Without taking the time to create a shared vision, the chances of sustainability in the network will diminish.



## Listen for Change

*Instability and change have been constant themes for us as we've dealt with ill health, hospitalization and death. We needed to explore ways to connect which didn't tire Maggie out... explore supports that would be able to change as her and Don's needs did. We had to listen really hard all the time.*

*Ranjana, Cowichan BC*

As network development progresses, an individual's ability to convey their desires also will change, as will their desires. New people will enter the network and others will exit. Listening deeply throughout will create a culture that will enable the network to continuously shift direction. Most importantly, it will provide individuals at the centre of our efforts with the confidence that this will occur.

The groups surveyed for this portrait identified a variety of methods which support the process of listening. Some people use their questions as the primary tool; others prefer one of the formats described below. Sometimes this process begins with a facilitator, the individual and/or the family, other times it may involve a larger group of people providing an opportunity for meaningful engagement together.

### 1. A Life Story Book

The Life Story Book begins with the compilation of a list of people currently and formerly in a person's life. A letter about the Life Story project is sent to people who are asked to write back and share a special memory, mention a person's gifts, reflect on the gift of their relationship together, or send some pictures.

The Life Story Book process supports an individual and those around them in telling the story of the past while focusing on the gifts and contributions of the individual. It can be a starting point for gathering people together before setting a course for the future. L'Arche Canada is a valuable resource regarding this process. For more information, visit [www.larchecanada.org](http://www.larchecanada.org).

### 2. A Personal Portfolio

A portfolio or scrapbook gathers stories, pictures and memories that begin to capture the life of the person; it also offers an opportunity to consider a vision for the future. A portfolio can include sections on: cycle of seasons and celebrations; childhood and afterwards; and vacations. Involving family, friends and a facilitator in the development of a portfolio or scrapbook is often an enjoyable way for the network to get to know the person at the centre. For more information: Continuity Care of Winnipeg, Manitoba [contcare@mts.net](mailto:contcare@mts.net) or visit [www.seniorscan.ca/lifestyle/advoc/contcare/future.html](http://www.seniorscan.ca/lifestyle/advoc/contcare/future.html)

## Capacity Search Tools and Planning Processes

There are a number of capacity search and planning tools that focus on getting to know someone. These tools build a description of someone's life which clearly identifies

capacity, desire, opportunities for the future as well as supports required and roles people can play. They include:

## **1. A Personal Future Plan**

A personal future plan is a seven-step process that encourages families to look beyond professional human services when creating a safe and secure future for their loved one. It combines all of these with the active involvement of their vulnerable relative, members of the family and others. PLAN's books 'A Good Life' and 'Safe and Secure' provide worksheets and suggestions for future planning. Contact a Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network affiliate in your area or visit [www.plan.ca](http://www.plan.ca) for further information.

## **2. MAPS – Making Action Plans**

MAPS is a planning process for people and groups that begins with the telling of the story of the individual, the history, and proceeds through a series of questions which asks people to reflect on their dreams, nightmares, gifts and desires for the future. For more information visit the Marsha Forest Centre [www.inclusion.com/forestcentre.html](http://www.inclusion.com/forestcentre.html).

## **3. PATH – Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope**

PATH is a valuable process to assist in the clarification of a vision and identify next steps for Personal Networks to take. PATH starts in the future and works backwards on the steps required to achieve an outcome. Both PATH and MAPS are excellent tools to engage the network in listening, thinking and discussion. For more information visit the Marsha Forest Centre at [www.inclusion.com/forestcentre.html](http://www.inclusion.com/forestcentre.html).

## **4. Community Connection Curriculum**

Within the Community Connection Curriculum produced by the University of Nebraska, there are a variety of ideas and tools to use in the process of listening and learning about an individual. For more information, contact Living in Friendship Everyday, Inc. of Winnipeg, Manitoba. [Life2@mts.net](mailto:Life2@mts.net)

## **5. Share the Care**

Share the Care is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the public about group care giving. Their model is presented as a road map on how to form a care giving team. They offer tools for listening, thinking and planning. For more information, contact Connecting Generations of Calgary, Alberta or visit [www.sharethecare.org](http://www.sharethecare.org).

## **Conclusion**

Taking the time to listen is directly linked to the sustainability of a network. Listening is about building trust. Helping people to shape a vision for their life, to find answers to questions of what would bring the deepest contentment and to support the seeking of those answers with others in a network is slow and precious work. Its success depends on how well we are able to listen and understand.

## CHAPTER III

### PATHWAYS TO CONTRIBUTION

*Tracy is medically fragile and very frail. She has a strong circle of former assistants who have stayed in her life - this speaks to the connection that can form in a year. Tracy radically changes people because she is so relational...and she doesn't move or say a word.*

*Beth, Toronto, ON*

Contribution is revealed through relationship. Whether we share an activity or a moment, being together provides the opportunity for our gifts to be experienced and appreciated. When we find authentic pathways for participation and contribution, we build a solid foundation for the sustainability of that relationship, and so the network.

#### The Challenges

Individuals who are vulnerable, regardless of the reason, are often not expected to contribute. It is sometimes hard to see capacity when an emphasis has been placed on an individual's needs and challenges. In other situations, when an individual's gifts are recognized the challenge is finding a way to ensure the gift is given. Another challenge can be reluctance on the part of the individual – particularly young people and people with mental health concerns – to articulate a desire for making connection. And sometimes the cyclical nature of their illness makes it difficult to develop any continuity within a relationship.

We can overcome these challenges and find pathways to connection and contribution in two major ways. One, we can find or create places where interests can be expressed and where talents can be expressed, ignited and appreciated. Two, we can also create opportunities for network members to connect with each other in meaningful ways.

The following suggestions emerged in study as practical ways to create pathways for contribution and connection.

#### 1. Find the Gift

*Through the journey of becoming a dog owner, Deb now belongs to the unofficial club of owners who meet in the usual places where dogs are walked. She receives 10 e-mails a day as a member of international and local groups of retired Greyhound dog owners. She participates in Save the Greyhound projects. She knows the people who own the local pet store and she knows the other patrons of this store. The act of becoming what many thought at the outset to be unrealistic – a big dog owner – has brought Deb into a new community and has resulted in rich relationships born out of a shared passion. People say Deb's contagious joy and enthusiasm inspire support from those around her.*

Discovering individuals' interests, gifts and talents – often thinking quite imaginatively - is the key starting point. The next step is to determine where to go to find people who might share these interests. For many people this means finding a familiar place to become a regular or a member: a dog club; the quilting guild; or the church choir, for example. Sometimes, as in the situation of seniors, the pathway often involves “bringing the community to me.” Seeking a local gardener who would enjoy sharing time with a seasoned fellow grower of seeds is an example. There is no *best before* date for contribution. The desire to contribute and the ability to do so are present at any age.

## **2. Structure the Welcome**

*We have been trying to connect Ken with the Toastmasters Club, since he's so good at sharing his story with school kids. Everyone is very nice, but nothing is happening. It's awkward and I know Ken is disappointed. I'm not sure he'll want to return.*

*Tom, Lethbridge, AB*

The essence of facilitation is in strategically supporting pathways to the connection. Simply attending an event or function does not automatically result in connections, especially for those individuals who are shy or communicate alternatively. Finding an ambassador within a community group who is willing to introduce the newcomer around and look out for them is a good way to initiate and support an individual's involvement. The network facilitator's task is to ask the right person within the group and give them any information or support they might need to do this.

## **3. Seize Connectable Moments**

*Even having Alzheimer's disease and often being quite anxious and disconnected from people, Alice was very relaxed and cheerful when we went into the bakery to buy a pie. Everything about the place, including Bessie the owner, seemed to put her at ease.*

*Paula, Montreal QC*

Listening well - especially with our eyes- helps us to recognize a connectable moment. The act of recognizing Alice's ease in the bakery is the first step to seizing the opportunity to extend her connections there. The next step is initiating, translating or bridging the contact into a conversation. We can use the opportunity to present an individual through a capacity lens. For example, being introduced as “Alice who was a fine baker” can lead to an opportunity of engagement such as to come bake on Tuesdays.

## **4. Let Passions Collide**

*When we were interested in learning how to create scrapbooks about our lives, we advertised for a volunteer to teach us. We found a woman who was doing this as her hobby. She was quite passionate.*

*She connected to certain individuals and is now looking for more ways in which she can contribute to our L'Arche community.*

*Cynthia, Winnipeg MB*

People we met spoke repeatedly of individuals being “hooked in” by coming face to face with someone who appreciates their unique talents. This notion of sharing an interest or passion relates not only to hooking new people in, but also to finding ways for network members to engage with the person at the centre of our efforts – along with each other – that in the sharing creates the deeper bond between them.

## **5. Create the Gathering Space**

*Our church created youth retreat weekends as an opportunity for kids to make connections while they were having fun and being challenged in new ways. For many, this was an opportunity to be seen in a new light. Not for example, as a “troublesome boy” but as someone not afraid to try rock climbing.*

*Tony, Winnipeg, MB*

Creating a gathering space for people to meet and share who they are is particularly useful to meet a common challenge of young people not being responsive to the notion of a *network* or willing to articulate a desire for friendship. Creating a structure and an atmosphere where participation is invited and contribution is highlighted allows for connection to be made – and facilitated - in a seemingly more casual way. Schools are the obvious gathering places for young people and opportunities for contribution and relationship should come through being a part of what school life is all about – the learning activities of the curriculum. When this does not happen – as is often sadly the case - creating a gathering venue such as a club or a newspaper can open opportunities for contribution and relationship.

## **6. Be on the Lookout for Green Spaces**

*We always look for ‘green spaces’– places which are welcoming. One of these is the museum where Rebecca is a volunteer. Who’d have thought that this would work? Accessibility is a nightmare – she has to use the freight elevator – but as a result, the museum is learning more about access. Rebecca helps others understand the creativity it takes to get somewhere. She opens their minds and shows them how to move barriers.*

*Susan, Toronto ON*

What is compelling about Rebecca’s story is that it was her presence at the museum that sparked the museum staff to learn more about access. Often we don’t know when we will come upon the welcoming place until we’ve arrived there. The key is in continuing to search for it.

## **7. From Presence to Involvement**

*Thinking about what my role would be with my brother as my parents were about to be dead, I struggled with how to connect with him as a sibling, and not as a replacement parent. And so we reconnected with an old family tradition around football. It began with two brothers watching the game together, which led to a decision to have a Grey Cup party, which led for the need to have a planning party to plan the party, which led to the party, and then finally a regular Wednesday night gathering with a small group at the pub.*

*Jeff, Winnipeg MN*

For many people involved in this study, a challenge was often expressed in finding ways to engage people from *presence to involvement*. For siblings who had been disconnected from their family member, friends of family who had been involved with the person in a peripheral way, to church congregations which had known a person by their presence but in no other way, the act of shifting gears presented a challenge. Regular gatherings and creating new activities can lead to shared traditions that extend relationships and deepen connections.

## **8. Find Authentic Ways to Be Together**

*Mary's mental health was not always stable which sometimes made it awkward for people to make a connection. But we realized that relationships could develop by doing something together which itself was stable. So we formed a writers group that met once a week. Many in the organization had an interest in this and different degrees of talent. Mary, we discovered, had more talent than anyone.*

*Marianne, Montreal, QC*

Relationships often build as a result of doing together what people enjoy and believe in. Finding that point of entry for a relationship to develop further is often the key. In becoming a part of an activity which is ongoing – even if the person at the centre of our efforts might not always choose to be a part – individuals can become engaged with an enjoyable activity and in time might find that they also enjoy the people.

## **9. Weave Connection into the Regular Fabric of Life**

*After I mentioned it was Flora's birthday, John came by with a gift for her. He's an expert gift buyer. It made me realize that I'm often thinking that I need to find ways to spend time with John. I get so busy, it doesn't happen, I feel badly and everything seems burdensome. But I've realized that I can bring John into the routine of my life, like to a birthday party. He is not a burden – he is a giver of gifts.*

*Bruce, Lethbridge AB*

We don't necessarily need to shift gears and start from scratch in order for a bond to develop. Finding ways to weave the relationship into the regular fabric of one's life will also get you there. Inviting someone to come over for dinner (we always have to eat); to join you and friends at the museum; to read to the children and while you paint a room are examples of how sharing activities is also about sharing our lives. It does not have to be experienced as an add on.

## **10. Being Together is the Great Thing About Doing Together**

*When I'm walking in the mall with all these people around me, I can feel like a real nobody. Then Stan sees me and approaches me with his beautiful smiling face. I feel loved because Stan seeks me out. It's obvious how much he cares for me.*

*Donna, Lethbridge AB*

For some people, connections are made best through shared interests. But connection is not only about *doing*, it is also about *being* – being together, caring for each other and feeling cared about. Many network members spoke of simple, yet profound pleasures experienced merely by having a person's presence in their lives. Our tendency to always be 'doing' can prevent us from experiencing the contributions which result merely from being together. It is important to be reminded to value the many different ways in which contribution is experienced within the network.

## **Conclusion**

A group of parents being surveyed for this portrait ended a discussion by freely articulating what they perceived to be their sons' and daughters' contributions. One parent exclaimed, "People don't realize what good people they are missing out on knowing." A focused approach to creating pathways for contribution helps to ensure fewer people are 'missing out' by not knowing individuals who are vulnerable or live on the margins of our communities.



## CHAPTER IV

### RECIPROCITY

*Since Elizabeth has come into Ildiko's network, she's taught her how to build, paint and do bead work. She laughs as she tells the story of creating a bird house for Ildiko's mother. 'We had such fun. Before she couldn't paint and now she paints everything in sight.' This past year Ildiko made everyone in her network a Christmas present and when her birthday was coming up – 10 days after Elizabeth's – she made it clear that both days should be celebrated together. Elizabeth speaks emotionally of how Ildiko called her every night the week prior to her having cancer surgery and called right after the operation to see if she was alright. Teaching Ildiko to give has not been hard work. 'When you do this, it's not for one person alone – I get so much out of this relationship.' Everyone describes Ildiko as a caring and sensitive person and the network has provided her with numerous outlets for the expression of these qualities.*

*Elizabeth describes a 'team of friendship' that has evolved out of the network.*

“A team of friendship” is an evocative way of describing the results that can come from having a network. As individuals share and exchange everyday experiences, the awareness that we all have membership within a reciprocal web of relationship is strengthened. The network exists to house and contain these relationships.

People involved in this study regularly spoke about the reciprocal nature of their friendships with vulnerable individuals. They recognized both what they were contributing and what they were receiving; they felt enriched by the ongoing exchange of emotion, acknowledgement, assistance, pleasure and even sorrow.

#### **The Challenges**

Our ability to see and nurture reciprocity between people with and without disabilities is not always straightforward. As those involved in this study observed, people often get caught up in the good feeling and inherent hospitality surrounding the initial invitation. But unless they find a meaningful way to connect with the individual, their involvement often will fall away.

Movement beyond a culture of 'volunteering' to one of reciprocity takes time. Often people enter into a relationship with someone who is vulnerable with the clear intent to give, as indicated by nature of the role and label of volunteer. The opportunity to witness and experience the contributions of the person at the centre is a gradual process. Appreciating the time required to develop an understanding of reciprocity as well as for reciprocity to evolve is challenging but the benefits and the link to sustainability are undeniable.

## How People Benefit

### 1. Personal Transformation

*When Theresa was having problems with some people being rude to her I went to check out the situation. I told them that I'm a part of her network and so they got me involved in trying to help. Letting people know she has a network of friends who care about her says a lot about Theresa. It removes stereotypes about her and about me too. I have a disability – high functioning autism – and this experience has given me confidence. I used to keep to myself a lot. Now I give talks in high schools. I want to educate people and be a role model.*

*Ginelle, Kelowna BC*

Young people in school and their observers spoke of students becoming more considerate, gaining confidence and exercising leadership as they used their voices to advocate for a friend. In other situations, people spoke of how they were changed by knowing they were trusted by someone whose previous experiences made that difficult. Others spoke of becoming more caring. Often what people spoke of receiving was insight – into the capacity of a vulnerable person – as well as insight into themselves.

### 2. The People at the Centre

*I'm in a lot of networks. Because I have bad social skills I'm not the best at holding complicated jobs, but I'm a good network member. I can be a friend and help people out.*

*Lyle, Vancouver BC*

People at the centre of networks recognize and speak eloquently about the importance of giving to others in the network. We've heard many stories of people who initially considered shy, withdrawn or somewhat reluctant, became the *welcomers* at meetings, parties and various types of gatherings.

Individuals with networks spoke with pride about the way their contributions were valued and had impact on others. Many were aware of the way in which the eye of the network could shift to various members of the network depending on who required attention at any particular time and this had profound meaning to them. The increasing awareness that "It's not all about me" provided people at the centre with a greater sense of their own worth.

### 3. The Benefits of Belonging... for Everyone

*I was feeling rather alone when I came here. A single, older woman new to the community is not a social asset. Now I feel very included and part of a group. I too have*

*found friends. For me, making the contribution is as worthwhile as it is for the people receiving it from me.*

*Pam, Burnaby BC*

When network members form relationships with each other they experience the network as a personal community. “I am not alone” and “I know that people will be there for me” were common refrains as people spoke of the importance of belonging. Many acknowledged that they joined because they were invited or wanted to help, but they stayed because they experienced benefits which came from developing new friends.

Although reciprocity may be intangible and often spiritual in nature, there is a transparency to it as well. When relationships are reciprocal, they create a magic and energy which is both noticeable and attractive to others. Network members witnessed how being on the inside of a network was desirable to those outside the network; others witnessing the magic of a solid network often communicated a desire to be on the inside.

## **The Impact of Belonging on the Broader Community**

*The kids in Mallory’s network have had an impact on the quality of her schooling and the culture in the class. They speak up if they encounter a barrier on her behalf. They take notice of other kids too. If one of them finishes their work early they go and help someone else without being asked. Kids always get it.*

*Barb, Dartmouth, NS*

As Mallory’s network exemplifies, feelings of belonging are deepened as members of the network witness the presence their group is developing and how that presence impacts on the broader community. Many came to recognize the model that the network presented to people as a sign of hope - that no one need be alone. How network members moved about together in the community and how they spoke of their involvements allowed others to witness belonging and friendship in action, providing ripples of thought and change to resonate in their path.

## **How To Nurture and Sustain Reciprocity**

*When we invited Margaret into our prayer group we thought we’d be doing something special for her. Then we saw how seriously she took her prayer life – in her own way. We have learned something about the nature of faith from Margaret, and how it is different for all of us. We hadn’t realized until then that our relationship with Margaret was reciprocal. She has given us a new perspective.*

*Wally, Lethbridge AB*

Reciprocity is not a check and balances kind of equation – one contribution unit in and one contribution unit out. It is often subtle, intangible and slow to reveal itself. Given the history of assumption that people who are vulnerable can’t contribute it can take time for reciprocity to develop and be understood. The suggestions below can help.

## 1. Come Together Regularly

*We are constantly thinking of reasons and ways in which to gather. Sometimes it's obvious and other times we invest in some very creative consideration of it. Although it takes energy and is sometimes challenging, we know that you can't develop relationships if you don't see each other.*

*Sandra, Winnipeg MB*

Bringing social networks together regularly helps members to:

- Deepen relationships and strengthen the group
- Capitalize and expand upon natural opportunities for celebration
- Create continuing opportunities for contribution
- Be there for the good and bad times

It is important to remember that people are equally compelled by fun as well as by functionality. There are no rules regarding how often and in what ways a network should come together. Each network will be unique and will determine what suits the group best. There is no value in creating a false rhythm.

## 2. Create Continuity

*Once when we were having a difficult time I sent out an e-mail to the network, just to keep them up to date on what was going on in Jim's and our lives. I was overwhelmed by the support I received. Some people called to see if there was anything they could do. Others sent an encouraging e-mail with suggestions. Some contacted Jim directly. All this happened because I let them know that we were in trouble.*

*Karin, Saskatoon SK*

Keeping group members connected in between gatherings helps people remember discussions and plans as well as generally sustaining continuity. E-mail is a great tool along with the snail-mail version. Sending a funny anecdote, a paragraph summary of the week that was, a picture, a question or request is all very useful. For the more ambitious, a newsletter with pictures can record meeting minutes and events.

Establish a *once a month club*. Send out a monthly calendar of activities and events that might be of interest to the person at the centre. Network members can sign up for an activity "once a month." It's an easy approach to supporting people to be regularly engaged.

Record the history of the network and capture memories by maintaining scrapbooks, journals, collages and the like to which all members contribute. These picture narratives demonstrate the often rich history of the group and are a sign of its endurance. Their display at events can attract new people into something tangible.

Create traditions for starting and ending meetings (with a story or song), for ways in which people listen and speak (passing a talking stick). Traditions like these will help the group define itself.

### **3. Tell Stories**

*We begin each get together by someone sharing a story about what they and Alan have done together in the past month. It somehow always reflects a situation where Alan demonstrates his wisdom in the face of the other person's bumbling. We get to laugh at our ineptitude and Alan gets to bask in the glow of his very publicly acknowledged value. We then always find a way to link the story to what we are all learning together.*

*Grant, London ON*

Telling stories about the adventures of our relationships is fun and it strengthens our capacity to reflect and to find meaning in what we are doing. Gathering together to tell stories also provides inspiration and renews energy and activity. The experience of thinking out loud and in the presence of others provides people with an opportunity to see what is often invisible.

### **4. Recognize and Appreciate Subtleties**

*Real relationships usually develop in small steps over considerable periods of time and, by their very nature, tend to involve a lot of pretty 'uneventful events' like going to a movie every couple of weeks; or getting together each year at a Grey cup party; or shooting 8-ball and eating pizza down at the pub every month or so.*

*Jeff, Winnipeg, MB*

Whether people speak about a shared experience between two network members or recount a triumph for which all network members can take credit, the sharing of these moments is an act of collective inspiring which helps create a sense of membership and accomplishment. The stories all come together to comprise the treasure chest of the network's jewels which we repeatedly take out, shine and admire - and sometimes embellish. Each time they are shared they nurture a network's sustainability.

### **5. Acknowledge and Nurture the Capacity to be Reciprocal**

*We have a list of Birthdays for everyone in the network and we help Jim send out cards. Jim has a responsibility to be a member and to demonstrate mutuality. You don't just receive. I see that Jim enjoys knowing that he is contributing and people feel good when they hear from him. Subsequently they contact him and so it has the added benefit of igniting connections.*

*Karin, Saskatoon SK*

It is important to nurture reciprocity, especially when the person in the centre is not used to giving. Help by pointing out what they have to offer and assist them in acts of reciprocity: send cards to say thank you and to acknowledge important events; buy or bake a cake for a busy friend; clear the walkway of snow for someone who is ill; or just call to say hello.

## **Build the Sense of the Collective**

*The roots of the Baby Boomer Café came about when we tried to develop a discussion group on how we were going to support our siblings with disabilities and replace our parents when they die. Not many people came out for that. When we realized the issue was how can we connect authentically with our brothers and sisters, we learned to ask a better question, like ‘How can we have some fun next Tuesday night?’ Our gatherings are better because Bob plays music and Doug dances. We all really enjoy being together and out of that comes a lot of potential.*

*Jeff, Winnipeg, MB*

Events that bring networks, families and community members together in various ways – for celebration, fun, information, fund-raising – increase the awareness for people that they belong to a larger group. This provides affirmation and momentum which strengthens the individual as well as the collective effort. Gathering together also provides opportunities for mentorships to develop. Individuals and families who have been walking this path can offer encouragement, advice and vision which serves to support the sustainability of the efforts of those less experienced.

## **Conclusion**

Reciprocity is a dynamic exchange of give and take that exists in healthy, sustainable social networks. When reciprocity is cultivated and celebrated in networks it solidifies the bonds of caring that unite the group.

## CHAPTER V

### LETTING GO

*When Johnny was born the doctor handed me some papers. He said that Johnny won't live or he won't be normal and all I had to do was sign the papers and forget about him –this was my opportunity to be rid of the problem. I tore up the papers and threw them in the waste basket and I took Johnny home...*

For countless parents of children born with a disability, their history is one of being told to let go of their sons and daughters before ever having the opportunity to embrace them – both in their arms and within their lives. At the other end of the spectrum of life, care giving seniors and their children also speak of the pressure to institutionalize and so to let go in ways which are unacceptable to them. Letting go has been and continues to be a complex challenge for all people involved in the development of this portrait.

*I had eight other children and no idea what to do and so I spent all my summer vacations going to school and taking the best courses I could find. It wasn't hard to read all the books because, in 1951, there weren't that many. Whatever I did, I took Johnny with me and so did the others. He was the centre of the family...*

People in this portrait spoke of the variety of roles they have played in the lives of their children, siblings and parents: developers and managers of service and staff, advocates, nurses, teachers, and often the singular soothing balm in the face of the person's loneliness. They have often come from a culture of "It's our responsibility and we will carry it by ourselves." From such a history, seeing the way to letting go is hard.

*When Johnny got older, I couldn't do things with him anymore and after raising him and teaching for 20 years, I felt I needed a long holiday. I saw that PLAN and having a network was a way to relieve some of the single responsibility I had.*

*Lillian, Lethbridge AB*

The development of a network for any vulnerable person – so as to enrich their lives and to surround them with caring as they or their loved ones die - compels everyone involved to consider the necessity and the way to letting go. It is after all inevitable. However these two small words – letting go – often feel impossible to families. It is essential to identify and understand the barriers in order that they be overcome.

## The Challenge

### 1. Giving up Power

*I've learned to accept that others can also care for my mother. This experience has been magical. My mother is living again rather than just existing.*

*A Daughter in Cowichan BC*

When new people begin to play a significant roles in the lives of a vulnerable family member there can be fear of giving up power to the network. It is difficult to change or relinquish power and believe that others will care as much and do as well as you. It is even more difficult to consider that they might do better than you.

### 2. Fear and Insecurity

*My son is difficult because of his alcoholism. I've seen the kind of people who tend to come into his life. I don't have confidence in the people he chooses or who choose him and I'm afraid he'll burn out any good people whom the facilitator finds.*

*Mrs. Hope, Ottawa ON*

Family members speak of fearing the kind of friends the person might want and their possible negative influence. As a result, they often feel compelled to mitigate what goes on between network members and their child: presenting cautions, seeing obstacles, and in the process, becoming an obstacle themselves to a new relationship forming.

### 3. Dueling Visions

*A father laments that he is in his 80's and still goes to hockey games with his son because there is no one else. He worries that nobody will know that his son's favourite meal is spaghetti. But relationships have meaning in relational contexts. Maybe we don't need to find someone to take him to the hockey game, but need to find someone who wants to connect. Maybe he'd like to eat something other than spaghetti?*

*Jeff, Winnipeg MB*

Family members often have a well-established picture of the individual and a vision of how the network will function. Coming face to face with others having a different perspective often results in dueling visions: one represents the comforts of the familiar and the other represents the risks of the unknown.

### 4. Letting Go is Hard for Everyone

*One of the biggest fears I've had was that when my parents were no longer around I'd end up on the street. It's happened before.*

*Rick, Montreal QC*



The challenge of letting go is not just for parents. Individuals used to being cushioned by their families, can have difficulty in imagining the future without these supports. This can result in a reluctance to take the risks connected to engagement with others.

Service providers also demonstrate their own barriers when they maintain old assumptions about individuals and their capacity for contribution. Service providers also see risks of engagement which can sometimes be met with a tightened grip on someone's life. Facilitators of networks can also struggle with letting go when they focus their energies on establishing a relationship with the individual at the neglect of inviting in others.

## **The Benefits of Letting Go: Self-Determination Through Interdependence**

*Beth is doing things now which we could not get her to consider. She moved into a suite in the basement. The network helped her with a painting party. She started going to adult education classes – one member rode the bus with her, another accompanied her the first night. The network sees her potential and sees what she needs to reach it.*

*Roz, Waterloo-Wellington ON*

One of the most compelling reasons for letting go is allowing for the opportunity of growth through relationship. Who we are and how we see ourselves is made possible by how others mirror to us what they see and can imagine. This is the nature of social reciprocity.

*The experience of seeing people engaged and enjoying being so with her husband who had dementia stood in stark contrast to the message from society to her to institutionalize him. The network affirmed her beliefs and offered her ways to go against majority thinking. Even an 84 year old woman can become empowered.*

*Alain, Montreal QC*

Within every region and every set of circumstances, countless examples – enough to be the exclusive domain of this portrait – were presented of individuals who had developed new abilities, tackled a challenge, renewed fractured relationships, increased their confidence, articulated dreams for the future – even people doing so for the last time in their lives. These personal triumphs were attributed to the influences of belonging to a caring network of relationships. Letting go can be included in the list of triumphs that people might experience and it too demonstrates how we all need to be open to being changed by relationships we are in.

*I'm never going to let go of my 13 year old daughter – but I will pretend that I have.*

*Jeff, Winnipeg MB*

Of course, we never really let go of each other. What we need to let go of are beliefs and actions which prevent people from finding the way to being engaged together. We are not letting go, but rather holding on ... differently.

## **Letting Go: Tips for Knowing How**

*I know my mom is going to die and I will have friends who will be there for me.*

*Justine, Winnipeg MB*

### **1. Clear and Pragmatic Discussions of Vision**

Regularly revisit the reasons why the idea for a network was initiated; the dreams of the person at the centre, concerns for the future, and how we understand the network building process. Use tools to record and remind us of the ideas and plans which have been discussed. Being clear about our purpose can help to illuminate the ways in which thinking and actions might be holding the process back.

### **2. Start Early**

*When we would organize circle gatherings for Mallory, I was around but I removed myself. I wanted the kids to be comfortable and I thought they wouldn't speak their minds otherwise. Sometimes parents have to get out of the way so that relationships can form.*

*Barb, Dartmouth NS*

Consider the development of a network at the earliest age possible in order to take the time to build relationships and trust over the long haul and to begin the letting go before a crisis arises. Allow yourself to be inspired by young people, their vision and commitment.

### **3. Help People Understand Death**

*Patty's mom is aging and so we try to have conversations about what it means to be an adult with an aging mom. It's part of being a daughter and I need to assume that if Patty could initiate, she would do chores for her and prepare meals.*

*Wanda, Penticton BC*

When possible, help people to understand aging and death through discussion and by supporting them to take on aspects of care for their parents in the role of son or daughter. Create life stories or scrapbooks that visually depict the aging and loss process within the family so as to assist those who might require it in their understanding of cycles of life.

#### **4. Say Yes to the Offers**

*Sometimes you have to sit on your hands and let people have interactions. You will always be a barrier if they can't get past you in order to get to know your child.*

*Karin, Saskatoon SK*

Provide access to the person by ensuring that they are not over-serviced and over-programmed, leaving no room in their schedule to get to know others. Receive and accept offers from network members. Talk through and negotiate the details which are difficult or possibly frightening rather than rejecting them outright. And network members can persist in their offers – even in the face of rejection - so as to demonstrate their genuine interest and to engender the trust necessary before letting go is possible.

#### **5. Deal with Notions of Risk Head On**

*Hearing Dorothy speak of what was going on in the life of her 27 year old son made me stop and realize that I was still treating my 27 year old like a child.*

*Mirelle, Montreal QC*

Acknowledge that risk is inherent in striving for dreams and community relationships. Identify and name the concerns in order to identify with the group the safeguards that need to be in place to allow an activity, an idea, an adventure perhaps, to proceed. Use the network members as *touchstones of the real* by allowing different visions to be heard that are often born out of different – and perhaps more typical – life experience.

#### **6. Give Ownership to the Network**

*We started the network ourselves for Beth and only gave it over to a community connector in the last six months. That took it to another level. Now the network and Beth are directing it. We needed the time to develop trust in others and when we saw small indicators of that, we saw what would be possible if we were dead.*

*Lynn, Waterloo-Wellington ON*

Pose situations to the network for which support, advice and activity are required, giving people opportunities to respond and to do. Help to develop the trust that will bring confidence by taking a short *vacation* – out of town or merely out of action – as part of bringing everyday and challenging situations to the group. Let a network member do different things that can enable deeper bonds to form for example attending a meeting with a service provider or going on an excursion with a young person in place of the parent. Meaningful involvement by group members ensures that sustainability of the network.

## **7. Share Stories: Refer to the Wisdom of the Collective**

*Coming through the school system and raised in this time, Theresa believes she has rights and has a good picture of what life involves. She expects a lot out of life. She has dreams and goals that have been developed on her own, through her friendships and the example of her peers in school.*

*Cathy, Kelowna BC*

Share stories that inform and inspire one another. Allow younger families – experienced perhaps with a more inclusive life in school and community – to become mentors to help inform more senior parents of ways in which to let go and its benefits.

## **8. Consider Whose Network this is Anyway**

*Harold was skeptical at first but his wife was the driving force. Over time the circle had a huge influence on Harold, allowing him see that Danne had abilities he was not letting him explore. Danne has since moved out and it is working well. Harold let go, but the circle didn't let go of him.*

*Deb, Nelson BC*

Discuss the nature of support that is being built and for whom – is it for an individual, a care-giving family, an elderly parent? – and are there others whose needs require consideration as the network is forming. These discussions will allow for all kinds of detours in the road to be addressed, such as the situation where a parent initiates a network on behalf of someone who has no desire for it, or when parents need to be more present in order to allow their confidence to build.

Parents can explore whether, when and how they should participate as the network develops in order to ensure that individuals at the centre have greater opportunities to have a separate voice. Ultimately, parents will need to step back to prepare for the definitive letting go – that of death.

## **Conclusion**

In the face of working so hard to create a good life for their vulnerable relative, these two short words – letting go – often represent insurmountable challenges for families. In spite of these challenges, all of the people involved in this study spoke of the tremendously positive impact of the very conscious interdependence being developed within a network and how it strengthened, empowered and challenged individuals to strive, no matter their age or circumstances.

Taking the emotional risk to form a network takes great courage but families take the step because ultimately we all are willing to take the greatest risks for those people who are the most important to us. Letting go must happen and supporting people through this challenge is delicate work.

## CHAPTER VI

### CREATIVE COLLABORATION

*My daughter is 22. We had a lot of support in school, but when she graduated I realized that adult services provided a tenth of that. Before I heard about networks, I wasn't aware that my child was so isolated. But she is. It has been a real eye opener for me. I've seen that government and services won't be there and won't care for her as an individual.*

*Pat, Kelowna BC*

People need relationships and most people who are vulnerable also need services. The experience of the majority of people – if not all – involved in this study is that these two significant needs create an enormous tension in their lives. The biggest barriers to building sustainable networks of relationships for people who are vulnerable is to be found in service philosophy, practice. Finding the way to collaboration between service provision and freely given relationships represents a significant set of challenges.

#### The Challenges

##### 1. Service Mandates

*The needs of people with mental health concerns have all been pathologized and clinical services and programs are presented as the answers to all problems. In our efforts to build networks for people, we too have been devalued. We're not respected or included by the hospitals. We're continuously being asked about our qualifications. Our activities are seen as 'extras' that are less important in the scheme of things.*

*Maureen, Montreal QC*

Most services have had a traditional mandate that has not included relationships. Dealing with isolation and loneliness has been secondary to pedagogy and skill teaching for children in school; to residential services, functional living skills, day and employment programs for adults in social services; to clinical and medical supports in mental health centres; and to health and home care programs for seniors. Pursuing a more relational agenda has often times been perceived as representing a “soft methodology” and, therefore, less valued in the service culture.

##### 2. Concerns of Risk

*Service is concerned with risk, liability and accountability. I don't want to talk about safety in the way that services do. If something is going to happen then I want it to happen in the community rather than having my son shut away. I want relational accountability.*

*Barbara, Lethbridge AB*

The process of building relationships is one that the community guides and is by nature unpredictable. Service is often uncomfortable with a process for which no one can take absolute control and as a result has been afraid to use and promote community involvement. In an attempt to minimize risk, service can dominate people's lives by exerting increasingly greater controls. When we are unable to balance the risk of community living with appropriate safeguards, we can block the way to relationships.

### **3. Systemic Obstacles**

*One day I turned around and realized that service took away from me all the things that I used to love to do when I was young. Somebody came to clean my apartment, another person prepared meals. I always prided myself on being a good housekeeper and hostess and now I don't even have that.*

*Gertie, Montreal QC*

Obstacles to supporting relationship building are inherent within the service system: job descriptions; service plans; shift work; staff changes and shortages; demands on staff time; union regulations and service policies. People involved in this study recounted numerous stories of network members not having access to a friend due to their scheduled life; of individuals not having opportunities to explore an interest except in the company of five others who were similarly labeled; of friends being asked to agree to a police check; of names and phone numbers of children in school and their families not being provided because of confidentiality policies, and other stories of frustration too numerous to mention within the confines of this report.

### **4. A Focus on Deficits**

*These young people have come with issues. They have revealed terrible stuff to us – rape, abuse – but they did not want us to fix it, merely to hear it. What they also wanted was an opportunity to be known differently, to share who they are from a new story.*

*Jerome, Port Coquitlam BC*

The systemic obstacles which interfere with the development of relationships are minor in comparison to a culture which has known people by their needs and deficiencies rather than for their gifts and strengths. The perceived lack of spontaneous support from community members is often interpreted by service as a sign that community members are not interested or are not competent. What is often overlooked in this analysis is that the way in which service views of individuals can dominate their lives and prevent and erode the community's capacity to care.

### **5. Service Philosophy and Practice**

*In elementary school, efforts were made to build a circle of friends for Karen, but once she got to high school, I was told that this was not the role of the teachers here and that there was little time for that kind of thing.*

*Laura, Winnipeg MB*

When service directs the vision being developed for an individual based on what they can provide rather than on what it would take to support a good quality of life, that vision is diminished and the opportunity to work with the community to pursue new and creative ideas is lost. No system can be trusted to always know and seek that which is in the best interests of a person. All those surveyed for this study indicated a strong frustration in their attempts to lead or even be invited into the vision development process with service.

## **6. Defining the Roles**

*I don't want my daughter to only have paid people in her life, but not having any services is equally ridiculous. Why can't we allow people to do what they do well? If service is not good at building community for people, then they shouldn't do it, but they also shouldn't get in the way of it being done.*

*Nicola, Winnipeg MB*

In the rare instances where traditional services have made attempts in relationship building, particularly in relation to sustainability, the efforts often result in failure. These failures can result from an inadequately formed philosophy about the nature and importance of relationships as well as practices which devolve into projects which must fit into the structure of the overall service and which themselves are not sustained.

When service takes charge of relationship building on behalf of people they serve, it often situates community members in the role of being extensions of service provision. Community members then become identified as staff – within the broader community and within their own minds – taking on the *jargon* of service as well as other professional trappings. As a result, even the most well-intentioned efforts are impacted by systemic barriers even before the person leaves the building.

## **What Service Can Do**

### **1. Examine Service Practice and its Underlying Beliefs**

*If a person is not known and cared for then they are usually 'done for.' Service providers need to learn that welcoming people into the lives of the individuals they serve is as important as administering their medication and clipping their toenails.*

*Lynn, Burnaby BC*

Reviewing service philosophy, policy and practice in light of the recognition of the profound importance of relationships is a way to begin. Whether in school, work, clinical or other social spaces, identify and examine that which creates distance between individuals and community members such as, for example:

- how individuals are known and labeled
- the priorities established for individual and service goals

- where individuals are directed or supported to spend their time
- the room provided in someone's life for community participation and contribution.

## **2. Staff Development**

*If 1% of staff time was taken up with sustaining relationships by supporting people to send cards and letters, make phone calls, invite someone for dinner as part of what should always go on in their everyday life, this would result in some significant changes for the better.*

*Wanda, Penticton BC*

Service agencies interested in developing their capacity in relationship building for individuals both inside and outside of the service structure can organize in-service activities that teach support staff about the importance of relationships and simple practices for supporting friendships such as extending hospitality. In addition they can examine the hiring of a resource person more schooled in the ways of community and its development in order to help staff build their understanding and competence.

## **3. Create a Culture of Welcome**

*I felt very unwelcome in one group home where Marla was living. The staff didn't appreciate my calls each day to find out how things were going. Their idea of what to tell me was a 'good day' was whether Marla had an outburst or not. I had to call in advance if I was coming over, but I never felt comfortable or that I was in Marla's home. I found myself going less and less often.*

*Judy, Montreal QC*

It's not as straight forward as thinking that the introduction of simple changes in practice, such as engaging friends and family members in the system planning process, for example, will invite meaningful and essential participation. These gestures are important but they are not adequate.

The key is for service to reach out to friends and family in ways that they will find meaningful. For example services can support people to remember birthdays, keep photos of friends and family around, initiate contact with friends and family, create or buy gifts. These are all gestures which help sustain relationships because they inform family and friends that the service acknowledges that their relationships are important.

## **4. Inviting Network Forming Groups In**

Establishing a dialogue with network forming groups about the nature of network development work is a means to gaining greater understanding. Such a dialogue could include a discussion of the roots of the desire for a network, the work of network building, who will do it and how, and possible and anticipated systemic obstacles.



## 5. Witness the Power of Networks

*Attending the network gatherings has been an eye opener for me. I did not know that all these people were involved in Justine's life. I have also learned a lot about her from seeing her in the centre of this group and hearing about her desires for the future and how the members of the group know her. I have been deeply moved – and changed – by being here. It's also been a great deal of fun.*

*Service Provider, Winnipeg MB*

Requesting that staff find a way to observe and support the network is an effective way to deepen understanding and to signal the desire for collaboration. Service staff can become better informed about networks by attending gatherings and meeting with members. These events provide an opportunity to learn about the nature of the network as well as offering staff an opportunity to view the person from a story which might differ significantly from service.

## 6. Join with Community Groups

*We left our professional hats at the door and sat according to the neighbourhoods where we live as we all came together in a workshop to learn about Community Connecting.*

*Bob, Winnipeg MB*

Join with other groups to organize or attend forums for dialogue on topics such as friendship and belonging or to examine needs for policy change from a local, provincial and national perspective. Building relationships and support within the community can lead to substantive change.

## Tips for Individuals, Families and Groups Working with Service

Identify a key person within the service agency with whom to dialogue. As we understand in network work, it grows one person at a time.

Inform relevant service personnel about the network forming process before beginning. This early effort can pave the way to continued understanding and collaboration.

Invite a curious service provider to a network gathering as an observer and as a valuable resource to the group. The benefit of including one service provider in one network provides opportunities for an informed perspective to be brought back to the system.

Find ways to keep service *in the loop* by sending network updates and pictures as a way to present the network as a dynamic and ongoing presence in the life of the individual.

Find a grant or a sponsor to:

- create forums of dialogue and learning with local service providers and other community groups
- send a contingency of local service providers, family and network members to a relevant conference and/or visit with a community group to learn about their best practices, or
- invite a service director to lunch and do what you know best...begin to build a relationship.

## **Conclusion**

Service can be a source of support or a major obstacle to social network facilitation. Given the hard effort required for network sustainability to be achieved, success hinges on service and community collaboration. It requires a shared recognition of the importance of relationships and a mutual understanding of the roles service providers and friends and family play in supporting people who are vulnerable to have good lives. We have a lot of work to do together.

## CHAPTER VII

### FACILITATION

#### **Job Opportunity Available: Part time Facilitator. The Successful Candidate will be:**

*connected to community; believe that all belong; see and nurture capacities and gifts of everyone; problem-solvers; mature; young; doers; listeners; good communicators; story tellers; serious; irreverent; led by dreams; pragmatic; curious; inspirational; a follower; a leader; have many interests in life; have worked with people with a disability; have not worked with people with a disability; creative; have community building skills; able to animate a group; relaxed; tenacious; comfortable asking questions; good at inviting people; a teacher; a learner; self-starter; non-judgmental; confident; flexible; bold; resourceful; perseverant; empathetic; objective; patient; assertive; responsive; nurturing; be a friend; find friends and not be a friend; balance everyone's needs; have a strong ego; have no ego; able to set an agenda; able to let go of agendas; able to engage people with each other; imaginative; hospitable; have vision; have blurred vision; able to facilitate dialogue; focused; spontaneous; good at running meetings; good at planning parties; know how to develop trust; assist person at centre to speak out; know how and when to step back; know that love is the key to life; keep good records*

The work of facilitating social networks is complex and seemingly filled with contradictions – in what is required of the work as well as in the competencies required of the individual doing the work. The *partial* list above reflects responses to the question of “*What are the qualities of a good facilitator?*” The list is of course an idealized one. We can however extrapolate those qualities which describe a community organizer as defined in the community development literature. Relationships are the cornerstone of a healthy community. The work of network facilitation is about bringing people together in an act of creation.

#### **The Challenges**

People involved in this study consistently identified three particular challenges to enhancing facilitator effectiveness:

- 1. Recruiting and keeping facilitators who have the right qualities, attitudes and life experiences represent the first two challenges.** Some networks involved in this study had four facilitators in less than two years. Because most facilitators work part-time, the relative small number of working hours per month often attracts students. Their natural transience as well as the lack of lived experience which would provide a greater sophistication of understanding, presents an ongoing difficulty.

2. **Making the optimum match between an individual, their family and the facilitator.** Again, age has been identified as a factor. If you are a 20-something facilitator involved with a 40 year old or a senior care giver and her 50-something daughter, you will have greater difficulty drawing on your own life in order to make the connection as well as knowing where to go to further outside connections.

Although there is no one categorical approach to network facilitation there are some fundamental principles that apply. The foremost task of the facilitator is to nurture network sustainability. They do this by exercising their role in four primary areas: Inviting; Responding; Acknowledging and Shaping.

## Inviting

*I had to consciously push myself to learn to ask so I could do this work.*

The details of asking were outlined in Chapter I and require no repetition here. Rather than identifying this aspect of the facilitator role as *asking*, we choose the word *inviting* to better represent the task. The role of the facilitator is to invite people to contribute to the development of community and to benefit from the gifts of the person at the centre of the network and from the network itself.

### **...individuals and families to see things differently**

Facilitators are the first people who support and encourage an individual and their family to begin the process of identifying people to invite in. Knowing the great challenges that these steps present, the facilitator can frame the process differently, as one which offers the person being invited an opportunity for belonging and meaning and often results in everybody saying yes.

### **...people identified by the individual and their family**

Facilitators are the first people who support and encourage an individual and their family to begin the process of identifying people to invite in. If people are not comfortable with extending the invitation themselves, facilitators can do so on their behalf. In the process of extending the invitation, facilitators have the opportunity to clarify the nature of the invitation and to imply the honour in it by informing the invitee of how they are valued by the person at the centre. Facilitators also need to be vigilant throughout the life of the network in renewing efforts of invitation when required.

### **...the broader community**

In the process of identifying and enriching opportunities for an individual to contribute and meet people, it is often the facilitator who will at first accompany the person into the places where connection might be made. It is a good idea to practice how this will be said in order to convey the passion underlying the invitation and to introduce people by their capacities.

### **...inviting people to a first gathering**

Facilitators play a key role in setting the tone for network gatherings. The key is to help individuals and their families create the welcoming place at the outset as well and establish the space for listening and dialogue. Thinking about who will lead the meeting or lead people to talk, the kind of gathering desired, how people will be made to feel comfortable, how to ensure that the person at the centre is as engaged as possible – are all important considerations prior to the first gathering.

## **Responding**

### **...to the unknown**

*A facilitator must be someone comfortable saying ‘I don’t know;’ they must also be prepared to ask a question and then sit in the discomfort and the quiet of no response.*

*Sharon, Burnaby BC*

How each network develops is hard to predict. As one facilitator said, “it is never clear what will happen until it happens, and that becomes the context for figuring out what to do next.” As community development is about building capacity in others – not about being the primary doer or expert – facilitators must explain their role clearly as a resource and learn to say “I don’t know how to address this...what do you all think?” Rather than leading the way, facilitators lead people through discussion, brainstorming and collaborative problem-solving and ultimately to the recognition that the answers will be found in them. This also involves learning when it is time to stand back and to respond and nurture emerging leadership from within the group.

### **...to the vision of the individual, the family and the group**

*I see my role as allowing the opportunity for network members to witness and hear something different about Mimi from each other. As the eight network people share their stories about how they know her, Mimi becomes eight different experiences. When we started the network, she was just one. Now the possibilities for next steps are much more.*

*Michelle, Kelowna BC*

A facilitator is working on behalf of an individual and/or their family; accordingly, they must respond to the wishes, leadership and direction of those people. The facilitator can:

- activate the thinking process to help bring the vision forward
- summarize and re-state comments and suggestions to ensure messages are being accurately heard
- present ideas for consideration, and
- continuously pose clarifying questions

### **...to network differences**

*Rick and I became anxious, thinking that we had to formalize the network process. We presented an agenda and showed a video on the importance of networks. Half way through, we realized this was a terrible mistake. It was like we had pulled out the legal documents asking everyone to sign in blood. We didn't get together for awhile after that. We scared people off.*

*Karin, Saskatoon, SK*

Individuals, families and networks have different cultures and, as they evolve, they settle into an identity that suits the group. Some cultures are celebratory and party-like, others more formal and business-like. Some start with only family members and others exclude family at the outset. Facilitators must respond to these network differences by listening, observing and responding to the culture which is emerging with time. As facilitators bring people together, it is the network that will set the agenda and move it forward.

### **...to individual differences**

*I need direction. I'm much better off if the facilitator thinks of things for me to do. There were a number of times that I knew I should call Jamie, but then put it off. If someone could tell me that this or that should be done, then I'll tell them if I can.*

*Pam, Burnaby BC*

Movement from presence to involvement presents one of the greatest challenges expressed by most people involved in this study. Facilitators cannot impose the way or set the pace for this to happen. They can, however, create the context which allows network members to find, what for them, represents meaningful participation with the person and within the group. As one facilitator nicely said: "My role is to listen for points at which a connection is made – the AHA experience!"

Arriving at a meeting with a calendar of events, or even tickets, and a question of "is anyone interested in going with Brian?" works for some, while leaving it loose is the way for others. Finding the way to meaningful involvement also means finding which members need to receive in order to experience a feeling of satisfaction – uncovering the tangible and intangible rewards of the AHA experience.

### **...to the ebb and flow**

*Paul is a real nice 17 year old guy and he's hilarious. When his peers spend time with him they like him. But he's a lot of work as a friend. At his first sleep over the kids helped him upstairs, even with his toileting. As he's gotten older they do more without him. People his age are inconsistent. We can't count on them.*

*Evan, Kelowna BC*

The natural fluctuations in most networks occur because the lives of network members change. This fact of life presents a great challenge. Facilitators need to respond without panic, but rather an understanding that this is a natural occurrence. Facilitators need to possess a *different imagination* for meeting the challenge. For example, for a young person, this might entail organizing attractive activities which pull people in or looking for strategies to keep peers in the loop. If a person is reluctant, networks can form around the family of an individual with a mental health concern as they work towards finding a way to connect that individual to even one other person. And facilitators can focus energy on building capacity in a core of what may be only one or two people in the network while continuously seeking opportunities to extend new invitations.

### **...to a need for momentum**

*Peter provides us with hope. At the end of each meeting he always says, “When will we meet again?” With this we know that even if we don’t know where we’re going, there is at least a commitment to going.*

*Georgina, Toronto ON*

In the face of the ebbs in the life of the network, facilitators must learn the art of *nudging* so as to build up momentum when it stalls. Networks can withstand the loss of members when those who remain don’t lose their sense of belonging. A vital role for the facilitator is to be the *watchdog* – ensuring that regular meetings are scheduled and stories regularly shared. Facilitators are conscious of group dynamics and often make suggestions aimed at strengthening the network such as network outings or celebrations. It is a question of judgment. As one facilitator said, “You are never in charge, but you kick in 100% when things start to falter.”

## **Acknowledging**

### **...contributions**

*People may not realize this, but my biggest joy is when someone spontaneously calls Brian up on the phone.*

*Gail, Burnaby BC*

An important facilitator role is to acknowledge – publicly and privately – both the seen and unseen gestures which can have such great importance. Looking hard to see the day to day and subtle acts of friendship and acknowledging contribution provides personal affirmation to members and helps them to see the person at the centre in the contributing role as well. Facilitators can develop the capacity to notice and acknowledge reciprocal gestures, accomplishments large and small, shifts in thinking and even *merely* the fact that a person or the network has been around for one year. When people are acknowledged and can feel that their presence has importance, their participation will more likely be sustained.

### **...limitations**

*Peter's network was slow to build and I found myself being all things to all people – the facilitator of the network, a sympathetic ear for his mother and Peter's only friend and companion. In the face of all this need, I began to feel awfully resentful.*

*Sandie, Montreal QC*

Facilitators often made comments such as “This does not feel like work for me. It is an expression of who I am and how I am in the world” and in so doing spoke of what is both compelling and challenging in the role. Facilitators cannot be all things to all people. Acknowledging personal limitations is part of being clear about the resource role. More importantly, in revealing limits we model and provide an opportunity for others to do so as well.

Many network members reported experiencing some unease as their roles became blurred, multiplied or in need of a shift in the nature of their personal involvement. Unspoken tensions about the limitations which people feel are often the invisible barriers to sustainability. Acknowledging limitations can help people understand that boundaries are permeable and can shift over time. Such a direct discussion allows a facilitator to present people with the opportunity to relax and to become clear about what they can and cannot do.

### **...fear**

*I had known the family for years and Joanne was always there, but I wasn't necessarily thinking about her or interacting much with her. I wanted very much to be in her network and support the family but I was struggling. Eventually I mustered my courage and told the group that I was not sure how to be alone with Joanne.*

*Danny, Halifax, NS*

Our longing creates a sense of urgency in the face of someone's isolation and loneliness that can translate into impatience. We may want friendship to develop quickly, but impatience can prevent people from articulating what might be fears and uncertainty about being in relationship with someone who is vulnerable. Acknowledging fears by providing the opportunity for their expression is the first step towards developing strategies and supports in order for fears to be overcome or proven to be unwarranted.



## Shaping

### ...the offer

*When one of the kids in the group suggested that they take a trip to the amusement park, Sam's eyes lit up with delight, but I could read the reluctance in his mother's eyes. Here was this kid in a wheelchair, with epilepsy, needing help with everything and she couldn't imagine him in this environment. But the kids were so excited by the idea.*

*Brian, Fredericton NB*

“We are terrified that people won't offer to do something and we're terrified people **will** offer to do something.” It is the role of the facilitator to find a way to build a *bridge* between the offers and the responses by helping to shape them into gestures that can be received. This might entail exploring the idea, posing questions as to how it would work, determining how and if it connects to desires expressed by the person at the centre. Shaping the offer also might involve doing the work of arranging, organizing or even accompanying the event for the first time. Shaping the offer sometimes entails a lot of *up front* work to build confidence and capacity which is the nature of community development work.

### ...the innovative social space

*It feels good because you rediscover the human connection. It's this reciprocal thing. I feel that I'm of some help in some way and it feels good having you all as friends. I've never experienced this before in my life.*

*As told to Ranjana, Cowichan BC*

For many, engagement in a network process represents being in an innovative social space unlike any before. A critical feature of that space is dialogue. There are many voices within a network and a key facilitator role is ensuring that all voices can be heard. Facilitators can shape the space for dialogue by creating what could be considered ground rules for communication – either explicitly or by virtue of their example. Agendas can be presented which ensure important issues get discussed. When needs and ideas are expressed they can be discussed through the posing of questions that lead people to find answers to “How can we...?” “Where can we find...?” “Who knows someone...?” and “Wouldn't it be great if we could...?” Shaping dialogue invites people into a space of inquiry without directly pointing fingers or forcing people into doing. As one person put it “Some people go to a therapist to learn how to connect with people, but we are learning together.”

Being open to dialogue also will mean mediating between conflicting opinions and desires. In the process of seeking answers, differing opinions will surely result. Facilitators are not family counselors or therapists; they do, however, have a role in creating a safe space for conflict to be discussed and resolved.

The innovative social space is also one of belonging. Facilitators can shape this space by encouraging people to tell stories about what they've done with an individual and

what it has meant to them, and to provide encouragement to continue. Facilitators can encourage ways for group members to connect with each other – even simply by having phone numbers and e-mails. Ensuring that the attention of the group is never singularly focused by acknowledging in a very active way both the joyful and sorrowful events in all members' lives is also important in shaping belonging.

## **Conclusion**

In the work of building intentional networks of relationships, we must continue to consider and consolidate what we know; it's important to develop learning materials and opportunities to respond to the need to further our knowledge, our competence and our success.

Facilitators need to come together as a group to learn from each other as well as others with expertise, to problem solve and to be mentored, in order to build capacity and sense of belonging. Further training might be focused on the following challenges which all facilitators face:

- understanding the nature of community development and its relevance to the role of the facilitator
- making community connections and inviting/asking people into networks and into the lives of individuals
- supporting people to become engaged with the person at the centre of our efforts and with each other
- facilitating network gatherings and meetings
- shaping dialogue and mediating conflict within the group.

## CONCLUSION

*What we have loved, others will love and we will teach them how.*

*William Wordsworth*

Individuals engaged in the work of facilitating intentional networks of relationships for vulnerable people are transforming their loneliness into what Jean Vanier has described as a source of creative energy which can “fuel the fire to revolt against injustice” and drive us down a new path. This portrait demonstrates there is a great wealth of experience, knowledge, wisdom and insight available to lead us down this path and so construct a new reality for people who are isolated.

In researching social networks across Canada for ‘Reaching Out’ seven elements for nurturing and sustaining resilient social networks were revealed. Achievement of these elements presents many challenges. However the participants in this study have demonstrated a resolute face of ongoing creativity, spirit and profound commitment which *fuels the fire* of our collective inspiration.

We began this portrait with an expression of hope and so it is with hope that we conclude. We hope that the commitment and willingness to do, learn and share from each other, as was so evident throughout the development of this portrait, will continue to strengthen our bonds and our communities, creating a culture of hope and a place of belonging for us all.

## APPENDIX

Both the historical and current social forces which present the barriers to relationships, contribution and belonging call upon us to consider the many levels at which we must work. Ending loneliness and isolation requires that we also influence change at a broader, more political, level. In order to achieve sustainability for social networks, we must continue to work to change social policy and then to monitor its implementation and permanence. Towards that end, PLAN Institute has prepared a social policy brief entitled 'Connecting to Citizenship.' It addresses the kind of policy and regulatory changes that will support the development and sustainability of individual social networks. If you would like a copy of 'Connecting to Citizenship' please contact us at [info@planinstitute.ca](mailto:info@planinstitute.ca) or [www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)

## RESOURCE LIST

### British Columbia

#### **Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network**

3665 Kingsway Suite 260  
Vancouver BC, V5R 5W2  
Tel: (604)-439-9566 Fax: (604)-439-7001  
[www.plan.ca](http://www.plan.ca)  
[info@plan.ca](mailto:info@plan.ca)

#### **Okanagan Lifetime Networks Association**

2475 Dobbin Rd., Unit 22-199  
Westbank BC V4T 2E9  
Tel: (250)-768-4913  
[www.olna.ca](http://www.olna.ca)

#### **Cowichan Family Caregivers Support**

PO Box 13  
Shawnigan Lake, BC V0R 2W0  
Tel: (250)-743-7621 Fax: (250)-743-7628  
email: [info@familycaregiverssupport.org](mailto:info@familycaregiverssupport.org)  
[www.familycaregiverssupport.org](http://www.familycaregiverssupport.org)

#### **MCC Care Supportive Care Services**

103-2776 Bourquin Cres. W  
Abbotsford, BC V2S 6A4  
Tel: (604)-850-6608  
[mccscs@uniserve.com](mailto:mccscs@uniserve.com)

**Vela Microboard Association of BC**

5686 – 176 Street  
Surrey, BC  
V3S 4C6  
PH: (604) 575-2588  
FAX: (604) 575-2589  
[www.microboard.org](http://www.microboard.org)

**Lifetime Networks Victoria**

108-918 Collinson St.  
Victoria, BC V8V 4V5  
Tel: (250) 652-2698  
[lifetimenetworkvictoria@shaw.ca](mailto:lifetimenetworkvictoria@shaw.ca)

**Nelson**

[thekozak@telus.net](mailto:thekozak@telus.net)

**Representation Agreement Centre**

[www.rarc.ca/textual/info-info.htm](http://www.rarc.ca/textual/info-info.htm)

**Alberta**

**LACL PLAN**

The Inclusion Resource Centre Building  
527-6<sup>th</sup> St. S. Lethbridge, Alberta, T1J 2E1  
Tel: (403)-327-3365  
[lacplan@lethbridgeacl.org](mailto:lacplan@lethbridgeacl.org)  
[www.lethbridgeacl.org](http://www.lethbridgeacl.org)

**PLAN Edmonton**

12310-105 Ave. Suite 214  
Edmonton, AB T5N 0Y4  
Tel: (780)-488-2422  
[pedmonton@interbaun.ca](mailto:pedmonton@interbaun.ca)

**The Road Ahead Society of Calgary**

1000-9<sup>th</sup>. Ave. SW, Suite 300  
Calgary, AB T2P 2Y6  
Tel: (403)-263-8226  
[families@theroadahead.ca](mailto:families@theroadahead.ca)

**Connecting Generations**

23109 Connaught Postal Outlet  
Calgary, AB, T2S 3B1  
Tel: (403) 244 0001  
Fax: (403) 229 0688  
[www.cginaction.org](http://www.cginaction.org)

### **DDRC Calgary**

1118 Kensington Road NW  
Calgary, Alberta T2N 3P1  
PH: (403) 270-8200  
EMAIL: [info@ddrcc.com](mailto:info@ddrcc.com)  
Website: [www.ddrcc.com](http://www.ddrcc.com)

## **Saskatchewan**

### **RACL PLAN**

2216 Smith St.  
Regina SK S4P 2P4  
Tel: (306) 790-5680 Fax: (306) 586-7899  
[racl@sk.sympatico.ca](mailto:racl@sk.sympatico.ca)

## **Manitoba**

### **Continuity Care Inc.**

120 Maryland Street, Winnipeg  
Manitoba, R3G 1L1  
Tel: (204)-779-1679  
[contcare@mts.net](mailto:contcare@mts.net)  
[www.mbnet.ca/crm/lifestyl/advoc/contcare](http://www.mbnet.ca/crm/lifestyl/advoc/contcare)

### **LIFE – Living in Friendship Everyday, Inc.**

220-500 Portage Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 3X1  
Tel: (204)-772-3557  
[Life2@mts.net](mailto:Life2@mts.net)

## **Ontario**

### **Lifetime Networks Ottawa**

406-1390 Prince of Wales Drive,  
Nepean, Ontario, K2C 3N6  
Tel: (613)-748-7162  
[ino@magma.ca](mailto:ino@magma.ca)  
[www.lifetimenetworks.ca](http://www.lifetimenetworks.ca)

**Planned Lifetime Networks (Waterloo-Wellington-Oxford)**

5-420 Erb St. W., Suite 306  
Waterloo ON  
N2L 6K6  
Tel: (519)-746-1188  
[plnww@sympaico.ca](mailto:plnww@sympaico.ca)

**Planned Lifetime Support Networks (Bruce/Grey Inc.)**

P.O. Box 2217  
Port Elgin ON  
NOH 2CO  
Tel: (519)-832-6146  
[lgarrod@bmts.com](mailto:lgarrod@bmts.com)

**Québec**

**WSEP Lifetime Networks/ Réseaux pour l'avenir**

633 Cremazie Est, suite 200  
Montréal, QC., H2M 1L9  
Tel : (514)-363-5333  
[lifetimenetworks@bellnet.ca](mailto:lifetimenetworks@bellnet.ca)  
[www.reseauxpouurlavenir.qc.ca](http://www.reseauxpouurlavenir.qc.ca)

**L'ABRI EN VILLE**

Queen Elizabeth Health Complex, 2100 Marlowe Ave., Rm. 342  
Montréal, QC., H4A 3L5  
Tel : (514)-932-2199  
[labri@cam.org](mailto:labri@cam.org)  
[www.labrienville.org](http://www.labrienville.org)

**New Brunswick**

**New Brunswick Association for Community Living**

440 Wilsey Road, Suite 290  
Fredericton, NB., E3B 7G5  
Tel: (506)-453-4400  
[nbacl@nbnet.nb.ca](mailto:nbacl@nbnet.nb.ca)

**Halifax Association For Community Living**

260 Wyse Road  
Halifax, NB B3A 1N3  
PH : (902) 463-1767  
FAX : (902) 463-5007  
[hacl@istar.ca](mailto:hacl@istar.ca)

## **Nova Scotia**

### **Support Services Group Co-operative Ltd.**

22-24 Dundas St., Suite 100,

Darmouth, NS B2Y 4L2

Tel: (902)-466-0230

[supportservicesgroup@canada.com](mailto:supportservicesgroup@canada.com)

## **Newfoundland and Labrador**

Newfoundland and Labrador Association for Community Living

687 Water Street

PO Box 5453

St. Johns, NF A1C 5W4

PH: (709) 722-0790

1-800-701-8511

FAX: (709) 722-1325

EMAIL: [nlacl@nf.aibn.com](mailto:nlacl@nf.aibn.com)

Website: <http://www.nlacl.ca>

## **National**

### **L'Arche Canada**

381 Rachel E.

Montréal, QC., H2W 1E8

Tel: (514)-844-1661

[www.larchecanada.org](http://www.larchecanada.org)

### **PLAN Institute for Citizenship and Disability**

3665 Kingsway Suite 260,

Vancouver, B.C. V5R 5W2

Tel: (604)-439-9566

[inquiries@plan.ca](mailto:inquiries@plan.ca)

[www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)



## **Canadian Down Syndrome Society**

811 - 14 Street NW  
Calgary, AB  
T2N 2A4  
PH: (403) 270-8500  
TOLL Free: 800-883-5608  
[dsinfo@cdss.ca](mailto:dsinfo@cdss.ca)  
[www.cdss.ca](http://www.cdss.ca)

## **Roeher Institute**

Kinsmen Building York University  
4700 Keele Street  
Toronto, ON M3J 1P3  
PH: (416) 661-9611  
FAX: (416) 661-5701  
[www.roeher.ca](http://www.roeher.ca)

## **Web Links**

### **Philia**

[www.philia.ca](http://www.philia.ca)

### **Slow Food Movement**

[www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)

### **Inclusion Press**

[www.inclusion.ca](http://www.inclusion.ca)

### **PLAN Social Audit**

[www.socialaudit.ca](http://www.socialaudit.ca)

### **Ties that Bind**

[www.nfb.ca/tiesthatbind](http://www.nfb.ca/tiesthatbind)

### **Representation Agreement Centre**

[www.rarc.ca/textual/info-info.htm](http://www.rarc.ca/textual/info-info.htm)

### **L'Agora**

[www.agora.qc.ca](http://www.agora.qc.ca)

### **L'Arche**

[www.larchecanada.org](http://www.larchecanada.org)

## Books and Publications

### **A Good Life – publication**

A Good Life is primarily for families, friends and caregivers of people with disabilities. It offers a step by step guide to creating a plan for the future which provides for the safety, security and well being of people with disabilities. It leads the reader to look beyond professional human services when creating a safe and secure future.

[www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)

### **Ties that Bind - film**

The Ties That Bind [www.nf.ca/tiesthatbind](http://www.nf.ca/tiesthatbind) is a film inspired by PLAN and produced by the National Film Board of Canada. This film has been developed as a resource for families and others who are worried about the future well being and security of their relatives with disabilities.

[www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)

### **Peace of Mind – CD ROM**

Peace of Mind CD ROM is a practical and loving guide to help you plan for the future of your relative with a disability. It is a feast of stories, testimonials, tips and step-by-step worksheets to get you started on your path to peace of mind.

[www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)

### **Safe and Secure – publication**

Safe and Secure offers clear, practical guidance for planning for the future. It provides information relevant to families within the framework of policy, regulations and practise in British Columbia.

[www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)

### **Company of Others – publication**

The award winning team of writer, Sandra Shields and partner photographer David Campion have captured the essence of social network development through the development of five stories, featured in a photo documentary format, while gathering the experience and knowledge of people throughout Canada to identify exemplary practices of social networks. This publication is due to be on the shelves Fall 2005

[www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)

### **Connecting to Citizenship – Policy Paper**

This social policy paper is a result of fifteen years of experience contained within the PLAN organization, the wisdom and experience of ten national affiliates, the national gathering in Vancouver on social network development, a conference on aging in Winnipeg, individual and family group contact during and outside the project time line, and numerous PLAN gatherings. [www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)

### **Annotated Bibliography**

For many labelled and marginalized people, isolation and loneliness are the biggest challenges they face. We are discovering that without a well developed social network it is difficult if not impossible to fully participate in and contribute to society. This bibliography has been prepared for people interested in addressing the fundamental

challenge of marginalization through the development and facilitation of social networks. [www.planinstitute.ca](http://www.planinstitute.ca)