

The goals of Partners in Policymaking are listed on their brochure: Independence, Productivity, Self-Determination, Integration, and Inclusion. Every word has real life meaning to a real life.



Original photography by DEREK OURADNIK

This story starts (and continues) with a young man whose lists of challenges are long and complex. He lead me to learning the art of advocacy and facilitation. He, my son, was the ‘heart’ of the matter; to find ways to give him what we all want... a ‘good life’ as Al Etmanski titled his book. He was and is my driving force and deserves those basics...

During Partners training I learned so many refinements especially in how to talk to professionals. I found that I could be more effective and bring about changes in **relationships** with those who have such impact and even power over parts of our family’s and in particular my son’s life. Like a twirly ice cream cone, different flavors distinct but together, that is how we need to work together. For the ice cream cone to be just right all of the flavors need to be present equally. Partners helped me be just that, a more efficient and an equal partner in planning.

After learning more about being not just an advocate but an effective one I decided to be brave and bold and put my dream for Derek on paper- not just my paper, part of an agenda for an IEP meeting when he was entering the sixth grade.

The dream, the wish, the goal that I had for Derek... to live in an apartment with 1 or 2 non- disabled peers in the community, not in an institution (ie: group home.) Sounds simple doesn’t it? But for a person who on paper looks like a laundry list of disabilities it was anything but simple. People looked at me, blankly it seemed or perhaps just guarding their expressions, one or two nodded, unsure I suppose if they should break it to me this could never happen. It has not happened before, not here, not that we know of. He needs such intense support, that’s why we were all gathered around the table. In recent history the words Severe to Profound had been used to describe his learning or non-learning ability. PDD-NOS, uncontrolled seizures, later aggression, all these were to be added on throughout school years.

So the success story is a long time in creating. One crucial step for me was always, always, trying to maintain the belief, that while I disagreed with some people or ideas along the way, many in fact most of the people working with Derek were authentic in their attempts to help.

There were some compromises to be sure, some instances of a staunch absolute stance, some hesitancy and some pushing. But having that vision/goal/dream to look to and remembering to think and wonder at every turn “how will this help us reach that goal” “what can we do this year that will help us reach that goal” was invaluable.

Developing an Essential Lifestyle Plan was also an actuating force. It made me visually aware of whom and what is important in Derek’s life.

Now, if you want to know the truth about what was the most important of all the details, all the planning, all the services, all the education and supports, the most important thing was and is relationships. All of those other things can be present but without real people who love, care, believe in our family members they are just 'services.' People, relationships, friendships make it explode into action.

Adding to my commitment was the advocacy and leadership education started at Partners in Policymaking and with an Essential Lifestyle Plan for Derek. Adding the right people one by one to Derek's life and letting some go away too. Letting each and every person bring in their circles, their families, activities, and passions to Derek's life ... with each experience helping him find his passion; –photography and nature. Through these expanding circles, finding people who just simply connected with him, who became friends of his, enjoyed his personality, his humor, his great, great capacity to love and express joy he has a life with purpose and meaning.

So for Derek, services started the process, gave it footing so to speak, and yes they are a crucial piece to the stability of his life, yet it is the relationships have helped the dream come true. Derek is now 27, he is just finishing a long transition to his own townhouse with 2 nondisabled friends in the community. He has just begun to explore a business of his own; photography. A friend connected him to a friend who is teaching him to develop this talent and using a natural inclination for 'visuals' to communicate in a whole new way with the world. He loves music, horses and being with friends. BEING WITH FRIENDS! The guy who used to be so nervous/anxious around crowds and the one who for some time didn't have close friends his age.

Derek and his best friend Gammy gave their first public presentation entitled "Stepping Beyond Care" highlighting the importance of relationship and friendships.

So back to the goals of Partners in Policy making does Derek have independence? YES, he lives in a townhouse of his own with his own friends. Is he productive? YES he uses his talents and shares his gifts with others. Does he have a self-determined life? YES,-so much more than we knew we could teach him to decide. And is he integrated and included? YES! And YES!! He is with a diverse group of people, nationalities, cultures, ages, families and singles, experiencing the same things other people his age experience. We are always thinking about the next step, what's next. And possibilities are endless.

Will Partners change your life? Not alone. YOU will, your son or daughter or family member and/or maybe even friends and support staff will, but Partners can be one of the crucial building blocks for that change.



Derek's photographs are available in notecards and as prints. For more information you may email rainyramsey@hotmail.com or visit <http://www.flickr.com/photos/derek-ouradnik/?saved=1>

Derek and best friend/roommate Gammy trying out some tunes.