

BreakingBarriers

everybody belongs • everybody serves

Voices of Hope and New Dreams

by Judyth Thomas

Calvary Reformed Church, Holland MI

I had an all-American son named Jon David. During his high school years he slipped further and further into the darkness of schizophrenia. No medication could alleviate the voices that tormented him day and night. My beautiful son's broken brain left him without hope and without peace.

After years of suffering through the difficulties of mental illness, he finally took his life at age 24.

My journey as an advocate with people with mental illness did not end with my son's death. Out of the pain and suffering of Jon David's life and death, God gave me and several other mothers a vision. One of the most critical challenges for people with mental illness is the lack of affordable, appropriate housing. A year before Jon's death, Ladder

Homes was founded in Holland, MI. Our first home contained eight private rooms with a shared living space for men. Throughout the years we have acquired two four-plex apartments for women, single mothers, and married couples. Along with the affordable housing, we provide case management support and advocacy for our residents.



Jon David: An all-American son and avid percussionist.

Jon David's drums (he was an avid percussionist) as well as the tormented voices have fallen silent. But clear voices of hope and new dreams can be heard from Ladder residents:

- "Ladder is very supportive. We run the house, take the initiative, and do the jobs. We form our own family and support group and genuinely care about each other."
- "I don't ever want to move out of Ladder. It's my home."

Themes

Fall 2014—Public advocacy. In this issue, CRC and RCA members describe how they and others have moved beyond church walls to advocate on behalf of people with disabilities.

Winter 2015—Traumatic brain injury (TBI). If you or a family member lives with TBI, how has life been impacted, and how has your church responded helpfully? **By November 15**, please send us a note describing your experience.

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- "My favorite thing about Ladder is the visits from the Ladder case manager. Ladder is a step up to quality living. I feel that through Ladder God has helped me to accept my weaknesses and understand my strengths."

After 23 years, Ladder continues to demonstrate God's love to his children living with mental illnesses. And I journey with them in memory of my precious son.

More information about Ladder Homes can be found at www.ladderhomes.org, and in *His Drums Fell Silent, The Voices Still Speak*, a book sharing my journey with Jon David and Ladder Homes.



Supporting 'the Spirit of the Child'

by Jane Brown

Meredith Drive Reformed Church, Des Moines IA

For more than 80 years, ChildServe (CS) in Johnston, IA, has been dedicated to care, support, and advocacy for children and their families in central Iowa with special healthcare needs. Through the years CS (www.childserve.org) has added services to meet changing needs in the community, growing from a home that cared for a small number of children convalescing from childhood illnesses to an organization that provides multiple residential and community services to more than 2,500 children annually.

Walk around the facilities and you will see its key focus: "Believing in the spirit of the child."

"Whether a child lives at ChildServe or at home with their family, CS comes alongside each with support they need and strives for new and better ways to fulfill our mission of partnering with families to help children with special health care needs live a great life," says CEO Lloyd Vander Kwaak, whose roots are in the CRC and RCA.

As a recently retired pastor who now volunteers as the Palliative Team chaplain, my role is to listen, pray, and walk with kids, families, and staff. Moving personal moments have included:

- Baptizing a 5-month-old held and surrounded by loving care staff;
- Gathering with staff to "clap out" a teen and family now able to go home, trained to live into adjusted life patterns;
- Watching a soccer team, honored by both city and state, visit a 12-year-old who played soccer before an accident immobilized her;
- Simply noticing a staff that in thousands of ways advocates for kids and families in their care and interactions with others.

"I believe strongly that we are created to live, work, and serve in community," says staff member Steve Barger, who also went through RCA commissioned pastor training. "We are in this together and each of us brings a unique set of gifts, talents, and skills to each situation. I was drawn to ChildServe because of the mission of partnership, which provides a unique opportunity to help families overcome the disparities that traditionally marginalize these children in society and in the healthcare venue."

More Online

Due to space limitations in the print newsletter, additional information for these *Breaking Barriers* articles, plus a letter to the editor, can be found online (www.crcna.org/disability and www.rca.org/disability).

No Longer Mountains Everywhere

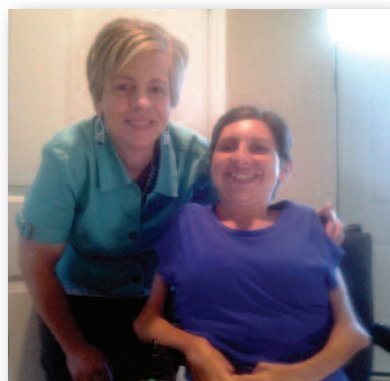
by Janna Kuiphof

Central Wesleyan Church, Holland MI

Two women in my community are working on an amazing project to offer housing for people who have only physical disabilities. Sara Walters, a member of Niekerk CRC in Holland, MI, worked for years before she could live independently with her physical disability. Her goal is to help others achieve the same independence that she enjoys now.

Sara (who uses a power wheelchair) and Gwen Rubio (a single parent) dream of building

housing units that will provide an affordable place to live both for individuals with physical disabilities and for single parent families. Because single parents also often struggle to find affordable and appropriate housing, the single parents will assist the residents with disabilities in exchange for lower rent. This assistance, along with non-residential caregivers hired through other means, would benefit everyone living in this housing community.



Gwen Rubio (left) and Sara Walters are advocates for HOME Ministries.

To learn more about HOME Ministries ("Housing Opportunities are no longer Mountains Everywhere"), contact Sara (sara_walters10@hotmail.com) or Gwen (rubiogwen@yahoo.com).



Getting out with a Power Chair

by Ivan Mulder

CRC Regional Advocate, Pella IA

The exchange outside a women's restroom in a large city airport when something like this:

"Sir, you can't go in there."
 "But my wife can't transfer by herself."
 "I'll call security!"
 "Go right ahead. I'm going in with her. She needs my help."

It's not that I enjoy entering the women's room, but without a family restroom I can't do otherwise.



Ruth Mulder can visit public places with certain accommodations.

People who live with disabilities can educate people in positions of responsibility to change behaviors and environments so that they enable rather than disable. Living with the challenges of a disability for 40 of the 53 years we've been married has provided numerous circumstances to advocate. We have done so locally

and beyond; privately and publicly; in person, through letters, and through the media.

A limitation becomes a disability when activities, products, services, or environment that could be made accessible instead are left inaccessible.

Of course, it takes financial resources and time to accomplish improvements, but one can't expect people with mobility disabilities to visit public places if certain accommodations are not provided.

Recently in worship, a guest pastor prayed: "Lord, we pray for those who are so healthy they can't begin to understand the sick." People make it

clear by the various barriers they tolerate that they don't mean to include people with disabilities, though it is not the conscious intention. With a little foresight much can be done easily and inexpensively to diminish or remove a disability and allow participation on an equal basis with others. ■

Hearing Loops as an Outreach Tool

by Laura Cooper

Delmar Reformed Church, Delmar NY

With the introduction of three hearing loops last April, Delmar Reformed Church (DRC) in Delmar, NY, has been an advocate for those with hearing loss while continuing its mission of spiritual and educational access for all.

Worshippers with hearing loss and community group members who regularly use DRC facilities now can access amplified sound through their personal hearing aids, without needing headsets, earplugs, or other sources of amplification—all thanks to the installation of hearing loops in the sanctuary, fellowship hall, and choir loft.

Local seniors come to DRC to attend the Humanities Institute for Lifelong Learning (HILL), which provides university-level classes for a nominal fee. The

Friendship Singers and their audiences have enjoyed looped concerts. Quilters United In Learning Together (QUILT) members have shared how thrilled they are with the new hearing loop.



The impetus behind the hearing-loop project began when pastor David Corlett learned that many members of the congregation were struggling to hear worship services. Following a presentation by Juliette Sterkens, an educator and advocate for the Hearing Loss Association of America, the plan to loop DRC was developed.

With help from several technically skilled members of the congregation, Don Batille of Hearing Loops Unlimited installed three loops over two weekends. ■



Editor's Note

A Mission of Advocacy

When God brought our first child, Nicole, into our lives with her multiple disabilities, my wife and I advocated on her behalf with medical and therapy staff, teachers, social workers, and even with friends and family. For example, because Nicole was extremely fragile in her early years, anyone with the sniffles was not allowed inside our house. Now, advocacy has become part of my identity.



Bev, Nicole, and Mark Stephenson

CRC and RCA Disability Concerns ministries advocate with people who have disabilities so that churches grow toward true Christian community in which people with and without disabilities equally belong and engage their gifts in ministry.

Advocacy is needed also with local, state/provincial, and federal governments so that people with disabilities can participate meaningfully in society *and* in the church. People with disabilities cannot participate in church life if they are without support in the rest of their lives. They may need transportation, support staff, adaptive equipment, and health care; however in North America funding for these needed services and equipment comes not through churches but through the government and other institutions.

In Canada Disability Concerns has advocated against “right to die” legislation and for good palliative care. In the U.S., CRC and RCA Disability Concerns have joined the Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition (aapd.com/idac) to advocate for public policy that provides adequate health care, independent and community living supports, employment, and education for people with disabilities.

Advocacy is part of our mission as Christians, and part of the very character of God. Jesus promised, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16,17 NIV).

—Mark Stephenson

Often Invisible in the Workplace

by Hank Kuntz

CRC Regional Advocate, Classis Toronto

Thousands of Canadian working-age women and men who live with a disabling condition wish they had a job. Many have given up trying to get one. Nearly 17 percent of the population has some form of a disability, and more than half of working-age people with disabilities are unemployed.

How visible are people with a visible disability in your workplace? Discrimination faced by the other groups has nothing to do with abilities. By definition, people with disabilities face different types of obstacles. Because they do not have the range of abilities enjoyed by able-bodied persons, we need to find ways to utilize their abilities and contributions in the workplace.

Despite a lot of rhetoric, we in the labor movement have not done much to help the cause of those with a disability. Good intentions alone will not safeguard or promote integrated employment for those living with a disability. It's not enough just to provide employment. We can't discriminate with pay rates and view people with a disability as “cheap labor.”

Your workplace is where you can start to make a difference. Many programs are available both provincially and federally to get persons with a disability ready for work or to give wage support. Take a moment to see whether you know anyone with a visible or invisible disability who could use a job. If so, raise it with your colleagues, your boss, your family, and your friends. Raise it at union and organizational meetings.

Remember, real help for people with disabilities means respecting them as people. That means not taking advantage of them or getting rid of them when we think it's “impossible” or “too expensive” to help. (Abridged and reprinted with permission from *The Guide*, January/February 2000, a publication of the Christian Labour Association of Canada.) ■



■ Letter

Reading your issue on chronic pain prompts me to write. I was recently diagnosed with a mild form of bipolar disorder after spending 40 years trying to find out why I was the way I was. Much of that time I felt guilty, angry, and wished life was over. After reading a description of bipolar disorder, I was finally able to take action and get a referral to a psychiatrist. Now on mood stabilizing medication, I have turned into another person. Alleviating the pain and anxiety I lived with was life changing for my loyal spouse and four children. It is time to pay more attention to mental health issues that people suffer from and hide from the world because they are afraid.

—*Marian Van Tol*