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BreakingBarriers

everybody belongs • everybody serves

An Education in Learning Disability

by Beverly Cusack
Levittown Community Church (RCA), Levittown, NY

When our story together began in eighth grade, I became aware that school was not as fun for Joe as it was for me. Only later did I learn that he had been left back two times in grammar school.

Growing up Roman Catholic, Joe eventually started attending a Reformed church with my family. Soon after we were married in 1973 (eight years after we met), Joe made his commitment to Christ and became a member of Second Reformed Church of Little Falls, NJ.

In time, Joe felt called into full-time ministry. But since he had dropped out of high school as a sophomore, he needed a GED and undergraduate degree before he could consider attending seminary. Joe's first attempt at the GED was successful and he began attending William Paterson College part-time while working full-time at Eastman Kodak Company.

College was a struggle for Joe, and I had a difficult time understanding why. We had many heated discussions when I edited his class assignments. I believed that he was being lazy and kept telling him that he needed to apply himself more.

Joe finally became so frustrated that he sought out a psychologist for testing so he could find out "what was wrong with him." Besides his struggles at school, he was afraid that our son Paul (born in 1978) would think that his father was "stupid." The battery of tests showed that he possessed a severe deficiency in his overall reading ability despite an "I.Q. that fell within the superior range of intelligence."

This evaluation was a turning point in both our lives. Frustrations still existed, but now we were able to work together because we knew the problem was dyslexia. So, after some research, adjustments to his study habits, assistance from his professors, and much prayer, Joe graduated from William Paterson with a 3.8 grade point average, and later completed a master of divinity from Western Theological Seminary and a doctor of ministry from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary.

Joe and Beverly Cusack

In ministry it has been extremely helpful for Joe to have a voice-recognition program that assists in sermon preparation. Our congregations have been understanding and have provided lay readers each Sunday to share the Scripture readings. A competent, understanding church secretary has been key also.

As Joe's learning disability specialist noted, "Growing up with a disability such as Mr. Cusack's can be very damaging to the self-image." This has been one of the biggest hurdles to overcome. We have been blessed to serve with very caring and understanding congregations. We are upfront with them regarding Joe's dyslexia. We try not to hide anything, although we also don't want dyslexia to be a "crutch." Dialog about dyslexia or any disability is a wonderful way to educate others and reminds us that God has made each of us to be unique—not perfect—and loved. n

Our New Look

Readers familiar with *Breaking Barriers* probably noticed the redesign launched with this issue. We hope the changes make for a more readable, visually appealing newsletter. To comment or offer suggestions, send an email to coeditors Mark Stephenson (mstephenson@crcna.org) or Terry DeYoung (tdeyoung@rca.org).

■ Themes

Winter: This issue explores the impact a **spouse's disability** has on a marriage and the connections to church and family.

Spring: Some people with disabilities need daily assistance, including housing, but budget cuts have led to long waiting lists, and desperate measures. Please send us your story about **housing** by March 15.

Summer: What do you do for fun? How has disability affected your recreation? Please send your **disability and recreation** story by June 15.

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Grace and Love in a Time of Need

by Jean DeYoung
Messiah CRC, Hudsonville, MI

In May 2008 the doctor gave me the heart-wrenching news: "Your husband has Alzheimer's disease and frontotemporal dementia (FTD) characteristics." Rich was only 65 years old! I had many questions. Why so young? Where will this progressive disease take us? Will I be able to care for him to the end? How long will he live? Only God knows the answers, and he has a perfect plan.

Our family began the grieving process. Rich's personality has changed; he says and does things totally out of character. We grieve when he doesn't know our names. We feel sorrow as he loses his cognitive abilities. He was an electrician with a master's degree, but now even simple tasks are difficult for him.

Shining Lights

by Harveybelle Seaton
Sunlight Community Church (CRC), Port St. Lucie, FL

Grace and Ernest Liddle became members of Sunlight Community Church in 2002. Grace suffered from a stomach ailment that caused her severe pain, although many did not know of it. At the same time, she was actively caring for her husband who had advanced Parkinson's disease.

Despite these challenges, Grace became the contact person with Sunlight's missionaries, corresponding with them regularly while giving monthly updates in our newsletter, *Sunlight Messenger*. She has served as a deacon, visited the sick, encouraged others to do works of compassion, and continues to serve as missions chairperson while establishing a church library. Every week she still leads several groups and Bible studies.

We have grown spiritually along this difficult path. Leaning on the Lord has taken on new meaning. On our living room wall in big letters we put our life verse: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Shortly before we received the diagnosis, the Lord led us to Messiah CRC. The people and especially the minister welcomed us with love and compassion. We were soon invited into a small group Bible study that is supportive and understanding of what we are experiencing; people even changed their way of doing things to accommodate Rich’s disability.

Jean and Rich DeYoung

When our elder asked if we had any needs, I said I needed male caregivers for Rich while I went to support group. Soon he had 15 volunteers. He loves it when these men come. When I voiced a desire for a Christian support group, our associate pastor organized one. Now our church has a group for caregivers of people with dementia that is open to the community. The support of this group has been very helpful for others and for me and has been a great Christian outreach.

The wonderful people of our church shower us with love and compassion. We thank God for leading us here, for spiritual growth, for our life verse, for men to serve as caregivers, and for Messiah’s Christian support group. n

Until his death in January 2009, and throughout his ups and downs in health, Ernest wrote insightful articles for the *Messenger*. When he broke his pelvis and had to be away from home temporarily, Ernest’s countenance surprisingly became brighter and his speech louder and clearer. God revived him in a way that was marvelous in the eyes of those who visited him. Grace visited her “Honey” daily, and the church prayed for them constantly. Sunlight Church was packed for Ernest’s memorial service.

For 51 years Grace and Ernest shed light and hope as they engaged in their mission to spread the good news of God’s unfailing love and the story of redemption. We at Sunlight have been particularly blessed by their presence and faithfulness. Despite challenges they continued to serve because their strength was in the Lord. n

Letter

After 70 years of regular church attendance, I can finally say I look forward to going to church and listening to the sermon. No more trying to guess what is being said by reading the lips of someone 20 feet away; no more laughing when the congregation laughs, wondering what the joke was. I am profoundly hard-of-hearing, and have been all my life. What is new is “the loop.”

A recent member of the church—Pioneer CRC—who also has a hearing problem donated and installed a hearing loop, a device that carries the speaker’s voice right into the ear with a flick of the switch on my hearing aid. It carries the words with a clarity I never thought possible. So after all these years, I am hearing the sermon from beginning to end. What a blessing!

—*Fran Daniels*, Sand Lake, MI

A Day at a Time

When Roben and John Roon were married nearly 30 years ago, neither had an inkling how their life together would begin to change with the early stages of John's Parkinson's disease a little more than a decade later.

A Vietnam veteran who went on to become a quality-control specialist, John has served his church as a deacon, sound technician, and Bible study leader, among other things, but it's been months since his last visit to Pompton Reformed Church in Pompton Lakes, NJ. A recent bout with depression and an October surgery for spinal stenosis have kept him away, but church remains central to their life together.

"John welcomes companionship and appreciates visitors most of all," says Roben, who volunteers in the church library and as the church's disability advocate. "Visits from our pastors and elders mean a lot, but he really misses attending the men's Bible study group.

"The church has also been a big help to me. I take it a day at a time and don't dwell on the future, and since I see John every day I don't notice the changes that others do. So, it's been helpful that others have assisted me to think through the implications for our future.

"I know his condition will get progressively worse, and John is good at reminding me of the things I'll need to take care of some day. Usually I don't admit it, but actually reminders are helpful because my tendency is to say, 'I'll figure it out when the time comes.'

"John's even asked if I wanted to divorce him—like, 'Why would you want to be with me?'—but my response is that marriage is 'for better, for worse.' I still want to spend the rest of my life with him!"

Besides urging churches to provide accommodations for those with mobility impairments, Roben encourages others to speak directly to the person with a disability and to make the effort to visit when one is not able to get to church. She also encourages allowing time to respond when conversing with someone with a condition such as Parkinson's that often causes speech delays.

(Postscript: John Roon died on December 12, days before this newsletter was printed. Our prayers are with Roben.)

Editor's Note

Full-time Advocacy

Advocating on behalf of any underrepresented group takes on added meaning when there's a personal connection—whether the person is marginalized on the basis of disability, gender, race, vocational calling…

When I married Cindi in 1990, I understood she would face challenges as an ordained woman in ministry who also lives with hearing loss, but I did not comprehend how deeply they would affect me as well.

Although I've lived with a visible disability since birth, hearing loss is not part of my experience; still, much of what I'm learning at home about hearing loss gets practiced almost every day in the world, either in direct advocacy or in the way I interact with others. With hidden disabilities such as hearing loss, it's even more essential to advocate for people who are hard of hearing—even when Cindi's not with me.

Few disability advocates are experts in every kind of disability, which highlights both the need and the benefit of telling our stories to one another. It's one way we learn to become better advocates.

—Terry A. DeYoung

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