



# Connecting people:

## experiences from Grapevine

### Author



Clare Wightman  
Director  
Grapevine (Coventry  
and Warwickshire) Ltd

Grapevine is a charity run in partnership with people with learning disabilities. Based in Coventry and Warwickshire we work together to bring about change. When we do our work – when we intervene in people's lives – what is our legacy? Do we open people's lives up and make them richer or just create another experience of loss? Concern for people's whole lives and for lasting change motivates Grapevine's work, in particular our efforts to build community around people with learning disabilities.

### Key points

- ▶ It is important to believe that inclusion is for everybody.
- ▶ Information about what someone can't do is useless.
- ▶ Tune in, listen, observe and explore the people, places and activities that work best for someone.
- ▶ There are many different ways of helping people be part of their communities, eg. using our own networks, associational life in community organisations, one-to-one connections, 'community guides', using 'third places', intentional circle-building.

This article describes where we start from and how we try to engage ordinary people to care about, respect and enjoy knowing someone with a learning disability. It also describes some of what we have learned along the way.

We provide support so that people with a learning disability can:

- ▶ enjoy meeting new people and being part of their communities
- ▶ have better health
- ▶ understand what their rights are
- ▶ get through difficult times
- ▶ make their own choices and decisions
- ▶ plan for now and the future so that they get the kind of life they want.

## Essential values and beliefs

To be successful we have to start from a belief in inclusion. A belief that:

- ▶ we are all born 'in'
- ▶ all means all
- ▶ everyone needs to belong
- ▶ everyone is ready
- ▶ everyone needs support
- ▶ everyone can communicate
- ▶ everyone can contribute
- ▶ together we're better.

The most fundamental belief must be that everyone is entitled to be included and no one is too disabled or too difficult to qualify. None of us have to go on a course, pass a test or meet a set of criteria before we can be included in ordinary life. You don't need to be taught how to be integrated. It is practical learning.

Allied to this must be a belief in the importance of inclusion. Belonging isn't the 'icing on the cake' – it is an essential part of a good life. It keeps us healthy and happy. It keeps us safe. If we have never been present, no one will know when we are missing.

To make belonging a possibility we need to encourage and value each person's capacity to make a contribution. All of us have some 'deficits' – things we can't do and some 'assets' or things we can. Focusing on one or the other has an effect. Community is all about mutual exchange and sharing, so focusing on what someone hasn't got or can't do doesn't help.

John McKnight, Director of Community Studies at Northwestern University, Chicago, says this 'capacity approach' is critical. He has researched in the fields of community development and neighbourhood policy and is also currently Co-Director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, a national research and training organisation, focused on revitalising neighbourhoods McKnight says that for community building purposes:

- ▶ information about deficits is useless
- ▶ focus on assets in a person and a community and build on them.

## Getting started

- ▶ *Tune into dreams or desires that are about community and relationships*  
This was good advice from America. I like

the use of 'tuning in' because this work is not necessarily about the person with a learning disability telling you what they want directly. This may be too difficult for anyone with limited experiences and mostly memories of ridicule or harassment. Instead you can listen to what they do and don't tell you. You can notice the people and places that seem to work for them, that make them feel happy, relaxed and comfortable. You can pick up themes and stories from their past and reflect on what they mean. You can talk with people who know and love the person. In these ways, you can build a picture of what matters to them, what they care about – what makes them unique.

- ▶ *Being with someone in different kinds of places with different kinds of people.*

Seeing people in barren places doesn't reveal anything useful when you are helping them to build relationships. Going to lots of places and activities tells us more about what might work for the person and it creates energy and motivation on both sides. That time spent together is crucial too. It builds trust so that mutual understanding can grow.

## What next?

How do you use what you have learned to help other people enter into a personal relationship with someone – one of shared interests, mutual benefit and care? There are lots of things to try because anything that leads to relationships counts. Here are some of the things we have tried:

- ▶ becoming a regular at a cafe/bar
- ▶ sharing a passion for sport by joining a hockey team as recruitment officer and goalkeeper
- ▶ joining a steel band as resident fan and fundraiser
- ▶ joining a walking group for people the same age as you and ending up captain of their bowls team
- ▶ becoming a healthy walks leader
- ▶ realising a dream to be a DJ by having your own show on a community radio station and training to be a club DJ
- ▶ volunteering at a city farm.

We have combined a number of ways of engaging ordinary people and connecting them to someone with a learning disability: ▶

## ▶ Connecting people

- ▶ using our own networks of family, friends, acquaintances and workmates as the starting point
- ▶ mapping community
- ▶ being ourselves and talking in real human terms about a person and their aspirations without using service jargon
- ▶ evoking a positive image of the person and what their future might be, not evoking what they lack or need
- ▶ associational life – formal organisations, groups and clubs (eg. scouts, neighbourhood watch, residents' associations) and informal gatherings (eg. friendship groups)
- ▶ one-to-one connections based on mutual benefit
- ▶ enlisting the help of community members who can guide us round their world
- ▶ third places – associations based on location
- ▶ agency – supporting people to be instigators of community – starting something up and then asking others to join in
- ▶ intentionally building a circle of friends/support around someone.

### Asking

Deserick and I were enjoying the Caribbean Festival. A steel band came on. Their music was very enjoyable and excited the crowd, including Deserick, who began dancing and clapping along. After they had finished it was clear that this was an opportunity not to be missed. I wanted Deserick to be involved in some way. I'd never seen him so excited by anything.

I felt very nervous when I initially approached the band, I'd never met any of them before and it was clear that they were all very busy, lifting and loading their equipment. I looked at Deserick and remembered just how important it was for him to meet new people and begin to build genuine friendships. As clichéd as it sounds, I took a deep breath and walked straight backstage.

My whole approach was very relaxed, despite my anxieties. If people think that you are asking too much of them or you portray yourself as desperate, or asking a favour, people will instantly be defensive. Be relaxed, and treat it as if you are not asking for much at all. You may think you are asking a lot of somebody but they could see it differently.

We were pointed in the direction of the group leader. I introduced Deserick and myself, explained how much we had enjoyed their music and asked if there was any way we could come and see another one of their gigs or even a practice session. He was unsure at first but agreed to us coming along to a rehearsal. Deserick now goes every week.

**Natalie Peters**

## Learning about becoming a regular in a cafe/bar: using 'third places'

This term was coined by Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons* (1999). Oldenburg is an Urban Sociologist from Florida who writes about the importance of informal public gathering places. 'Third place' simply refers to associations or connections between people that are based on locations, like becoming a regular in a cafe or bar. A third place is a place of belonging, somewhere that is comfortable, and conversation is the main thing, a place where you can get known without doing much. There are no qualifications needed and no criteria to be met. It is important to go at regular times, which works well for people who enjoy routine. We have learned that this method of connecting cannot be used casually though – you have to be active not passive in your support as you need to spot opportunities for interaction and relationship building. We have helped people with high support needs to become regulars of local places.

### What we have tried

- ▶ Understanding the third place – observing how it is used and who uses it, the pace of it and what it means to people, absorbing its atmosphere.

### What we have learned

- ▶ It is important where and how you sit – be casual and relaxed, with no time limit, put your phone away. How you're dressed can matter – try not to look too obviously like a supporter in case people relate mainly to you or are wary of approaching you and the person you are with.
- ▶ Show that you like the person you are with and enjoy their company (don't try to do this work with someone you don't like). Show that you know about them and talk to them about what they're interested in. In doing this you are encouraging other people to see the person you are with as someone worth getting to know and you are modelling how you'd like them to behave.
- ▶ Be prepared, and one step ahead, when someone's behaviour can make it difficult

for them to fit in. Don't act like it happens all the time. Act confidently and don't make a fuss. How you handle the situation will influence how other people react to it. Acknowledge the behaviour but find something positive about it if you can (eg. with someone who kept calling the answers out loud in a pub quiz we said *'Imagine being that excited over a quiz!'*)

- ▶ Regularity is crucial as well as finding the best time to go.
- ▶ The fit between the person and the place has to be right. (With one person it was a busy coffee chain in a bookshop; with another it was a slow-paced independent cafe/bar with music and the same faces.)
- ▶ It's more than just being there. You have to create interaction (eg. bar staff were asked to look after someone's bag behind the bar while she went to a cinema over the road). Make it two way – we have helped with deliveries and unloading cars! We help out more than a general customer, go up to the bar more, remember names and use them. Needless to say, you have to help conversation happen and remembering names and other things you have been told is important.
- ▶ Leaving the person alone in graduated periods of time and telling staff when you're coming back can help reduce dependence on you as a worker (this was the case for someone with high support needs).

### What we are pleased about

- ▶ Third places help you to find new opportunities that grow from the people you meet there.
- ▶ The person gets a sense of belonging – a home from home.
- ▶ Other regulars and staff miss the person, show an interest, wave at you in the street, even phone you up because they have seen someone in what seems to be a risky situation and they are concerned.

### What we are concerned about

- ▶ It doesn't work if you are in the wrong frame of mind or the wrong mood.
- ▶ If you are accepted it is because you add something to that environment – and you have to keep that side of the bargain.
- ▶ Will families or other supporters understand it is not about just 'being there', but that it is a commitment that matters?

## Learning about where someone best fits in: using 'community guides'

Guides are people who know a lot about a community and the people in it, whether that is a neighbourhood or a community of shared interests, such as live music. Typically they are people who are well known and trusted. Ideally they can help you figure out where someone's passions and interests are needed and know the person you should talk to – they may even do it for you. They are not necessarily the people with leadership status like chairs of residents' associations; sometimes they are lollipop ladies, traffic wardens, the people who deliver the free papers to every house in an area, the local librarian or shop keeper.

We enlisted the help of community guides for two people especially. Dave was helped to co-organise a consultation event for his neighbourhood. This led to an invitation to join ▶



### Tips on asking

You are more likely to get a 'yes' if you:

- ▶ talk and behave positively about the person
- ▶ talk in real everyday terms and don't use lifeless service jargon
- ▶ just ask for advice at first
- ▶ mention someone or something you have in common
- ▶ ask for or offer a piece of practical help
- ▶ ask if the person can join in something already happening so no new effort is required
- ▶ ask for a small and specific commitment
- ▶ make it two way – we are 'hard-wired' to return favours.

the local residents' association, and he is now a member of a steering group responsible for improvements to his neighbourhood. Debbie, is being mentored by a professional artist.



### **What we have tried**

- ▶ Identifying and getting to know guides via third places so that you are not starting your search completely in the dark and from a position of being unknown.
- ▶ Following up contacts that one worker had in his previous job as a local reporter, emailing them and asking them to chat.
- ▶ Internet research.
- ▶ Approaching potential guides from a supporter's private/home life.
- ▶ Approaching library staff who have worked there a long time.
- ▶ Offering a hot drink to and saying hello regularly to lollipop men/women, neighbourhood wardens and news vendors.
- ▶ Approaching churches, which usually involve people who have local knowledge.
- ▶ Nurturing contacts outside working hours, such as attending a cafe/bar.

### **What we have learned**

- ▶ It helps to develop an acquaintanceship first – so you are not cold-calling.
- ▶ Our ex-reporter says that reciprocity is important in both journalism and community connecting. Think about what the guide will get out of it. What will they get out of knowing and being involved with someone?
- ▶ Potential guides don't care about your professional status. What matters to people

in communities is your integrity, your reliability. Can you be trusted? Will you do what you say you will do? In other words, your personal qualities. Also, it matters that you like the person that you are trying to connect. Do you see their abilities? Are you positive and optimistic? In other words, your personal outlook is important. All these things carry weight and influence in a community, not qualifications and formal checking processes.

- ▶ Guides are people who care about their 'thing' so you need to tune into it. Work out what matters to the community guide. A guide who is an events organiser cares that everyone has a good time and feels responsible for others.
- ▶ It helps when they have seen your relationship together first.
- ▶ They don't always need to relate directly to the person you support. Sometimes you are only asking for advice and knowledge, not involvement.

### **What we are pleased about**

- ▶ You get known and trusted in the community yourself.
- ▶ Enthusiasm of guides – they support your aims and give you feedback, because they care about community too. They make you feel optimistic and hopeful.
- ▶ They can make the world a much smaller place to find your way around, both as a connector and as someone with a learning disability.

### **What we are concerned about**

- ▶ Sometimes trails go cold and you don't know why – so it's good to have a few things on the go to avoid disappointment. But it can be difficult to juggle plan A and plan B.
- ▶ Some responses such as: *'It's time consuming! I can't just pop in now, I have to chat!'*

## **Learning about the best way to work with families**

Our experience has been that families can be sceptical and doubtful at first and have learned to limit both what they expect from services and what they expect from 'the

community'. But failing to engage families in the community-building effort is a mistake. They have lots to tell us that we need to know. They can help to sustain relationships when we are not there any more.

### What we have tried

- ▶ We centre our work around their routine and lifestyle. We fit in with them, not the other way around.
- ▶ Adapt yourself to what works for them in terms of approach, dress and language.
- ▶ Give support to family members too by being there as back up at home or at work, being there for the long term and showing solidarity – not just being part of the system.
- ▶ Put family members in touch with sources of skilled help, and 'prime' that skilled help first.
- ▶ Hold informal social gatherings not formal 'meetings'.

### What we have learned

- ▶ Going in with fresh eyes is valued by families. Expect to learn and don't make assumptions – families notice that.
- ▶ Allow 'being' over 'doing' – that is, make it safe for a family to 'off-load' because you won't do anything with that information unless they want you to.
- ▶ It is your qualities as a person that make you credible, not professional qualifications. If a worker can be approached and be friendly in their own time that makes a difference. People know you're being genuine so it encourages them to be honest with you about their feelings and experiences.
- ▶ Positive stories can help to alter some families' views. Showing that you are willing to spend time with someone and enjoy their company sometimes helps them to see the person differently too. Families have been deeply touched when we have talked about why we like to be around someone.
- ▶ Swapping roles can help, eg. take on the 'worried' role or the 'sceptical' role. That helps to release the parent or family member from a negative position. There are certain roles played in families and there is information that is implicit only – try to figure out the roles and make hidden information explicit.
- ▶ It can take a year's work for families to test and believe in your solidarity alongside

them, you've got to prove it over time.

- ▶ Some families have not respected our approach. They want professional dress and credentials. They expect a protocol or template where there is none. This can happen where family members work in services or professions like teaching.

### What we are pleased about

- ▶ Feeling at home and feeling valued and welcome by families.
- ▶ To be able to offer something positive when people have lost hope, keeping our promises and a feeling of having helped.
- ▶ Getting to know families and having them take an interest in our lives has enriched our experiences.
- ▶ It's nice to see the whole picture, not just an individual.
- ▶ People starting to become 'unpredictable' because of new experiences we introduce them to.
- ▶ Getting to know someone's history gives you an insight into their behaviour.
- ▶ It is nice to be a part of the family and join in activities, such as having dinner together.

### What we are concerned about

- ▶ What to do about feelings of loss on all sides when our relationship with them tapers off.
- ▶ Knowing that if you don't pull away you become a service.
- ▶ It takes a lot from you personally to build up relationships with people and their families in this way. You can feel apprehensive about doing it all over again with someone new. ■

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### References

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