Letter from the Director

Fall, 2023

Fall is in full swing. Fall bridges the extremes between the stifling dry heat of August, and the blustery chill of winter wind. Many people feel that of all the seasons, fall is the most beautiful. I agree with that sentiment. Nature’s magnificence is on full display, with God’s palette painting colors and shades no human hand could ever duplicate.

Seasons, like life, aren’t static. They come and they go. They each have an essence all their own. People are much the same way. We change over time, or at least we should. Consider how services have changed in the fifty years since the founding of RSS. Change is inevitable, and change is constant.

In many ways, the changes in the guiding principles behind how services are delivered are for the better. We now espouse notions like people choosing what sort of life they wish to have. The supports we now provide are better at helping people to become fully integrated participants in all aspects of the communities in which they live. Those changes are good.

Fifty years ago, in the field of developmental disability services, there was an ideological shift. This shift was a good change. Up until that point, large state funded institutions dominated the way our DD friends and family members were cared for. They were sheltered, warehoused, and segregated from the community at large. Then, things changed for the better. People started to be moved into more inclusive settings in the communities in which we live.

But it wasn’t perfect. They began living in group homes, and attending what were known at the time ‘sheltered workshops’. Fast forward fifty years, and the state of services has gotten much, much better.

We now have people living both in group homes and in their own apartments and homes. We have people attending day activity centers, which are more inclusive and integrated into the community, and we also have people working for a fair competitive wage for employers in the community. We now are mandated to operate under the guidance of CMS’ Settings Rule, which basically states that recipients of services get to have patterns of life just like you and me. This means they get to make the same choices and have the same opportunities you and I have. Whether it’s when to have their meals and snacks, who to associate with, or where they live, work, or play.

The CMS (Medicaid) Settings Rule goes a long way toward reaffirming and expanding those rights which had been articulated before in the Olmstead Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, The US Constitution, Montana Code Annotated 53.20.142, Client Rights Policy DD411 (1982), The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 Public Law 106-402, the Developmental Disabilities Act of 1984, Annotated Rules of Montana (ARM) 37.34.416 ‘Resident Rights’, Montana Constitution Part II, ‘Declaration of Rights’. I could go on, but you get the idea.

With all these rules, laws, declarations, and so forth, you’d think we’ve made the lives of those with disabilities, especially developmental disabilities, on par with yours or mine. If you think that, you are wrong.

Truth is, we can never legislate fair and equitable regard for all citizens on a societal level. We cannot write into rule of law treatment of any group of people with dignity and respect. It’s been tried, time and again, but laws, rules and policies alone will never get us there. Those things cannot teach us to see all people as unique souls, whose presence in our lives enriches us beyond measure.

Each of us must make the deliberate conscious choice to embrace one another as contributing, essential members of our community, and society. When you consider how cultural norms have changed, especially since Covid, that is a tall order. While I don’t mean to sound cynical or pessimistic, just looking around at how we treat one another, it would seem human relationships have not improved in the last few years.

Ghosting is now an accepted way to tell another person ‘no’. People go out to dinner just to be captivated by their phones, not with their dates. Writing disparaging things about others on social media that one would never say to their face has become the norm. Social anxiety, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse are as prevalent as ever, despite heightened awareness and more resources being used to combat them. Homelessness, increased crime, road rage, worsening marginalization of our most vulnerable, these are all symptoms of a condition that will not be solved through laws or the actions of our politicians.

The solution is simple. Like the seasons, we have to change. Nothing I say, or do, or write, can change anyone else. I, like you, can only change myself. And that change starts with an awareness of how my thoughts, actions, and words affect other people.

My challenge to you is this: Change something about yourself to make the world a better place for all. No one is too old to grow and become a better person. No one. That, and get out there and take in the magnificence of the season before us.