
WHAT MAKES A GOOD SUPPORT WORKER?

by Alison Ouellette, Windsor, ON , Canada

Alison Ouellette started her professional career as a Medical Radiation Technologist. She was married and a mother of three children. Alison has been very actively involved in the family support the advocacy movement. For example she founded Extend a Family in Windsor and became the Executive Director from 1981-1986. In 1990 Alison engaged with other parents in a fervent resolve to change the system to a citizenship model and established a local family support group called Windsor-Essex Family Network. She was a founding member of Family Alliance Ontario, has directed a grass roots initiative "Bringing Families Together Project" and continues to act as a parent consultant.

In 2001, Alison took a break from advocacy and community development work after her husband Paul had a heart attack. Along with Paul, extended family and supportive friends they developed and implemented a visionary plan so that their son David who lived with different abilities could move into a home of his own. This led to Alison writing a book "A Place Called Home" which shares Dave's stories of his great everyday life living in the community.

Sadly in October 2009 her beloved husband Paul passed away, followed 10 months later, by her treasured second son, David's sudden death. She continues to share David's wonderful achievements in the face of adversity to celebrate 9 very successful years in his own home. She talks, emails and writes about Dave's everyday life, his small business and inspires other mothers to advocate for their sons and daughters no matter what stands in their way.

What does make a good support worker? That is a very complicated question. From my family perspective I'm sure the traits that I think are the most desirable are

"From my family perspective I'm sure the traits that I think are the most desirable are different from an agency's, when they are considering hiring a support worker."

different from an agency's, when they are considering hiring a support worker. My experience has been long and varied for my son David born on June 21, 1974 - summer solstice in the northern hemisphere.

In the beginning when Dave was 8 years old, we hired our first support worker. Her duties were to care for Dave's needs. He needed to be fed because of his cerebral palsy and spastic quadriplegia which limited his abilities with his hands. He could not hold a spoon even though we tried using many different large handled spoons that

he could grasp. We even bought some crazy contraption that would lift the food to his mouth and he was to take it off the spoon with his lips! In spite of his

dedicated efforts, Dave's ability to do these tasks was never achieved. Therefore his first worker Suzanne, needed to be so patient and kind,

feeding Dave his favourite foods, chopped up or ground into very small pieces. She would sit for 1 ½ hours talking to Dave as



she placed the spoon and gently pushed on his tongue to persuade him to close his lips around it and remove the food. Her skills to carry out this need for Dave were excellent. All the occupational therapists in the world would not take the time she spent feeding Dave every dinner meal. He so enjoyed listening to her conversations. She taught him about the textures and colours of his food. All the while she smiled at his diversion



tactics trying to make her laugh when he coughed lasagna all over her face! He taught her how to duck quickly before the next cough. Success on his part! I would hear them giggle and wonder what was so funny. It was their little secret until I walked in the kitchen. She loved Dave and he loved her.

Josie, after her 1st year at the University of Windsor, spent time at a cottage with our family one summer when Dave was a pre-teen. With her very strong French accent and being far away from her home province of New Brunswick, she delighted in taking Dave up and down the three flights of stairs to the beach. She devised a very imaginative back

pack made from a large blanket to hold him on her back. Dave grinned from ear to ear

“She loved Dave and he loved her.”

as she carried him all over the sand, stairs and water during our summer vacation. She loved Dave and he loved her.

When Dave lived in his own home, we hired a live in caregiver - a housemate. Delfin, who came from the Philippines, worked for Dave for four years. He was a nurse and paid meticulous attention and careful detail to Dave’s very complicated skin care needs, his many medications for seizures and breathing problems all the while having fun. He made Dave laugh when he sang karaoke songs from their Saturday night outings. Knowledge and the necessary skills for some complex health complications which followed Dave’s hospitalisation and surgeries were essential for Dave’s well being and life. He loved Dave and Dave loved him.

Here is the short list of necessary qualities that all support workers need to possess

“That person must be the genuine find, the one who wants an inclusive life in the community for your son or daughter, and is willing to help them have it.”

- Patient and Kind
- Imaginative and Creative
- Loving
- Careful, knowledgeable and smart
- Honest and trustworthy
- Reliable and loyal to the person not to the job.

What I most want to tell families is 'trust your instincts' and listen to your son or daughter by watching their body language

adult is the one you want. That person must be the genuine find, the one who wants an inclusive life in the community for your son

or daughter, and is willing to help them have it.

I kept a list of all Dave's support workers who began in 1982

"In total Dave had about sixty wonderful workers over his life time. Every one of them, from the first to the last showed up at Dave's funeral on Sept 15, 2010."

if they do not speak words. Hire the person who has all these traits and then some. No one will be perfect, but the person who is keen and interested to help your child have a good everyday life like every other child or

when an individualised funding program gave Dave a few hours a day, five days a week of support until Sept 11, 2010. In total Dave had about sixty wonderful workers over his life time. Every one of them, from the first to the last showed up at Dave's funeral on Sept 15, 2010. They formed an honour guard along the sidewalk from the church as Dave went to his final resting place. They released multi coloured balloons along with me and all Dave's family and friends. We said good bye and celebrated his very inspirational GOOD life...a life well lived.



To contact Alison

Email: aco-web@cogeco.ca

Family web site : <http://home.cogeco.ca/~aco-web>