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# UNCOVERING GOLD: STRATEGIES FOR FINDING THE RIGHT SUPPORTERS

by Janet Klees

*Janet Klees has interwoven her own life with the lives of people with disabilities and families in community for over 25 years. She has been coordinator with the family-governed Deohaeko Support Network in Pickering, Ontario for the past 19 years and has been deeply affected by the lives of the people that she has come to know. Janet is the author of two books which are directly rooted in the Deohaeko experience, (We Come Bearing Gifts; Our Presence has Roots) as well as numerous other reports, documents, tools, and writings. Janet also works closely with other Scarborough, Ontario families, and several family groups and projects across Durham Region, Ontario.*

*All of Janet's work focuses on individually-designed arrangements rooted in local community. She is especially concerned that families are well-supported to think through practical, principled ways to ensure that their family members live meaningful, involved and secure lives within their communities. She deeply believes and experiences that community is better when everyone is included.*



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Brenda is a striking-looking middle-aged woman - tall with a full head of long silvered hair, dark-lashed eyes and a terrific smile. She has lived in a home of her own for the past 19 years – her own two-bedroom apartment in a housing co-operative, the same unit she chose together with her mother twenty years ago as the building was being built. For 18 years, her second bedroom was rarely used as Brenda resolutely refused roommates and overnight supports to step on her turf and limit her late evening and overnight freedom in the home that she loves. Instead, we came to discover a range of unique overnight supports which did not feel intrusive to her - a next door neighbour who kept her ears open for many years, two or three neighbours with insomnia who would watch lobby cameras over the years and respond to the few times Brenda would leave her apartment in the night, five or six neighbours with apartment keys should she need help returning, and a general neighbourhood of people who

came to know Brenda and could figure out what she needed in the night.

Brenda loves flowers and nature, and has been an environmental steward in her city for many, many years. She has a great sense of humour and watches sitcom reruns. She loves food and is a fan of the cooking channel on television. Brenda enjoys music, and dancing and going to co-operative potlucks and parties. She adores visitors and is often an official host, as visitors from many countries come to visit. From her mother, she has learned the art of offering tea and hospitality. Brenda loves to make things neat and tidy and her apartment is always at its best. This also extends to the grounds of her co-operative where Brenda maintains the grounds and walking areas as part of her co-operative commitment.

For the past two years, some would say that Brenda is in crisis. We see her as a woman who struggles to understand and manage her ever-changing life. Her beloved mother, with whom she spent many

hours every week, died two years ago. She was still mourning the loss of a dear friend and next-door neighbour of 14 years shortly before that. She has been beset with significant menopausal symptoms, and a lifelong emotional volatility has become more significant mood shifts that she cannot move

out of on her own. Potentially helpful medication – unheard of during the first 16 years in she lived in her own home – has its side effects and periods of adjustment. So, grief, insomnia, anxiety, rage, shifting moods, weight gain, fatigue, restlessness, and depression have been a part of Brenda’s experience for the past two years.

Part of our challenge has been to invite and build a support team of people around Brenda who join us in seeing possibility and potential where others might see crisis and despair. Brenda’s sister-in-law, Barb, came on board as Brenda’s mother became ill. Despite no prior human resource experience, and with only limited involvement with Brenda over the years, she was challenged with managing a team of 6-8 supporters

at one time who would not only show up to support Brenda, but to do so in ways that focus on small and everyday ways of ensuring that life is good and meaningful to Brenda despite the overarching challenges.

What does this mean? This week, in a week where Brenda’s emotions were low and her grief particularly eloquent (packing a

bag to look for her mother), I saw some of the following. As coordinator of the family group of which Brenda and her family are a part, when such things happen, I know we

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have got this right – for the moment.

- When I knocked at Brenda’s door at least three times this week, each time I hear a supporter saying to Brenda, “who is there? Are you going to get the door or shall I?” I know these supporters have understood the fundamental of this home belongs to Brenda. She is queen of this castle and is in charge of opening the door.

- Brenda and Sharla saw me in the hallways on Monday after I had been away a week and invited me to tea. When I arrived, not only was tea made, but this time tea was made in an elegant teapot on a tray with milk and sugar pots, mugs and spoons. It was elegant and gave a sense of occasion that Brenda responded to by playing the host in a lovely way. This

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supporter understood the importance of seizing every opportunity to make something out of small moments.

- I popped in at Brenda’s when Matti was over. Despite Brenda taking a long nap after a rough night, Matti had come up with

yet another new craft. While Brenda slept, Matti worked on a sample and Brenda only showed interest later on when the next supporter arrived. Nonetheless, this tweak of interest was enough to indicate to Matti to return with the craft the next day and Brenda became interested and involved.

Brenda to pick up on a new emerging role of offering a small car care service at the co-operative - Brenda's 20-minute car care service. Despite the short time, and Brenda's wandering attention during this new project, Nazalene assisted Brenda with humour, prompts and praise to move

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through the 20-minute task to the point where Brenda could enjoy her pay at the end of it. The two of them moved on to plan an Avon body

Matti has learned the unique balance for Brenda between having an idea and holding an expectation of a purpose for the afternoon, with going with the flow after a rough night. However, Brenda did not miss out on a chance and was offered to try yet again the next day. And furthermore, about a week later, I received one of her creations as a birthday gift – an example of extending the joy and interest in the crafting to sharing and offering to others. Brenda's

care product purchase – which includes an interaction with a neighbour who sells the product. Nazalene helped Brenda to feel productive during her afternoon – and like all powerful roles (even emerging ones) the benefits (pay, pride, purchasing, contact with a neighbour), this one lasted well beyond the 20 minutes of the actual car cleaning activity.



- I noticed a lovely vase of flowers one day this week on Brenda's living room table and came to hear that her weekday morning supporter, Carol, had invited Brenda to her home earlier in the week to pick some garden flowers for her home. Aside from loving the flowers on their own merit, this display became a conversation piece for each person as they arrived into Brenda's home: what lovely flowers, where did they come from, who picked them, etc. – a conversation that Brenda is able to engage in fully without assistance.

joy in giving a gift of her own making was evident. Matti's resolve in using the craft idea managed to build novelty, purpose and gift-giving (contribution) into Brenda's day. For us, these are all essential elements of her good day.

- Late one afternoon, I stopped by to pick something up and found that Sharla had helped Brenda to invite her neighbour, Liz, for tea. In my short glance, I noticed that Brenda had been helped to freshen up and that again a lovely tea service was offered. Yet another positive, happy memory for Brenda to have about her

- On Wednesday afternoon, spying a bit of extra energy, Nazalene guided

home and her living room. And what a great balancing memory for Liz to have against the times when Brenda has been troubled and upset in the lobby or hallways. I know for this scenario to happen, Sharla has to think about positive potential for Brenda, she has had to get to know Liz herself and get to a place where Liz is comfortable with her, and she has to recognise and seize the

moment when Brenda is open to the suggestion to freshen up, receive and entertain her visitor. This simple moment has been brought about by much thought and attention.

In short, we believe that we have managed to recruit, orient and teach a team of people who have come to see their role as helping, enabling, and assisting Brenda to put her best foot forward. They do so by:

- Safeguarding Brenda's sense of home and supporting her deep ease and building of her home at every moment
- Deepening our common understanding of "who is Brenda?" so that her options and choices and our suggestions and responses remain deeply meaningful
- Forging and affirming and deepening her roles of neighbour, family, host, volunteer, friend, nature enthusiast, and emerging small business person
- Keeping an eye to sustaining current relationships with family, friends and neighbours and to developing and encouraging new ones

What are the approaches, strategies and thinking that continue to guide us in our efforts to provide Brenda (and others) with the support they require? To answer this, Barb Boettcher, Brenda's sister-in-law, Diane Huson, our very part-time recruiter,

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and I joined efforts to review the elements that we believe make a difference. These include:

1. Work at finding people all of the time – We switched from a model of beginning recruitment just as someone was leaving, to charging Diane with this role on a consistent basis so that she is able to keep on top of candidates, potential sources, word-of-mouth sources as they come along, rather than waiting until the vacancy arises. She does so for the families of our family group of seven, in an average of 2-4 hours per week.
2. Cultivate good sources – Diane uses a few regular sources all of the time

"The vast majority of students go on to secure employment in stark contrast to the lifelong experience of unemployment for the majority of individuals with intellectual disabilities."

- a. Websites – kijiji, craig's list, local employment lines, and online classifieds for major newspapers – and learn how to use these well (ie create a separate address for responses, email to check reliability, how soon they respond, etc.)

b. Word-of-mouth – be open to options all of the time, without pinning them down, let others know (especially other supporters) that you are always looking

c. Other options are also chosen from time to time – writing up short job announcements for community places or to be handed out among allies and others; advertising in a local newspaper

3. Wording is important – Diane pays attention to including key words and ideas into her short job ads. Words like “typical community experience,” “deep respect for people with a disability” and descriptions of people in ordinary terms are all important wording that lets candidates know from the beginning what we are about and what we are not.

4. Start with the person requiring support – Although we are being open to finding good people all of the time, it is important to actively recruit for a specific person, rather than doing a general recruitment. If you recruit generally and meet a terrific person, you are apt to make

motivation and punctuality (are they quick to get back to you or do they get back to you when they say they will?). Candidates who have no time to respond to emails or telephone messages properly, have no time in their lives to take on a new work role.

6. Do a good and thorough telephone screening – Telephone screenings are vital and helpful, but realise their limitations, too. They allow you to assess a) punctuality, if set up like an appointment in advance b) language skills c) personality type (to a limited extent) c) their true availability d) their interest in wage and benefit levels offered. It also allows you to put all things on the table (ie low pay rates, expectations of letters of reference and police checks) so that the person can gracefully bow out after the phone call (ie they may appear accepting during the call, but it allows them to think things over and then decline the interview or not return the next call). This weeds out less-than-ideal people at an earlier and less painful level of engagement and avoids wasting time in face-to-face interviews that will not work out. Telephone

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screenings cannot give you very good information on personality or match with the person, and no information on true skills.

the supported individuals match them instead! Also specific recruitment allows you to creatively approach places where people who share similar interests might be found.

5. Use email and telephone messages to help evaluate the candidate. Set up a telephone screening to help you assess things like reliability (do they provide the information you have asked for?),

7. Model and be clear on principles from the start - For example, we let candidates know on the telephone (if not before) that we are not interested in finding segregated or grouped activities in the community, but rather typical community groups for people who share an interest. We mention that although this person is part of a larger family group, the sons and daughters of that group are never supported to be together nor do they share

support. We point out that all of what we do stems from the interests of the person requiring support. Although we do not expect such principles to be specifically remembered into the future, this kind of direction will sound highly familiar to the person by the time they start the orientation process.

8. Take the interview process only one step at a time - Recognise that success in each step of the interview process only means the person gets to the next level – not that they will be suitable. If an email response is clear, timely and positive, then a telephone call will be made. If the telephone call is clear, positive and gives all information, a face-to-face interview will be made etc.

9. Involve others in the interview process – This is a good way to get the input of others. For us, Diane, the recruiter, is involved at the initial stages (and sometimes later). She can give input on the big picture and background, and details of availability, etc. The family member(s) is involved, and then usually at least one of the coordinator or another circle member. These people can evaluate how well initial information has been retained and the personality fit.

10. Involve the person who will receive the support in the interview in meaningful ways – Some people like to be present at the first interview, and may simply listen or ask their own questions. This is relatively easy if only 1-2 people are interviewed. It is confusing or frustrating if many people are interviewed. In addition, many families feel that people may feel rejection if desired individuals do not take the job. For us, people only meet those who have already

met all of our other requirements so that it is a personality fit and match more than anything and the individual is more than competent to take this on fully. When the person who requires support meets the candidate, usually another support person is present. The person themselves gives good feedback on comfort, personality at least as a starting point, and the supporter can give information as to team fit and their opinion on match with the person.

11. Allow paid “orientation and decision-making time” – If all other criteria is met, and you feel reasonably positive, invite the person to a 3-week working orientation.

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Such a period is very helpful to people who do not do well with sit down interviews to say if they will like the new candidate. The new candidate will work side-by-side with the person and a family member, friend or support person (with greater and greater distance ) over a few weeks in order for both parties to gauge interest, suitability, match. It also allows you to check on punctuality, cooking skills, ability to manage details, etc. Be clear in this period that any party can respectfully say, “thanks but this does not work for me”. All worked hours will be paid.

12. Understand that a two-fold match is being sought – The working relationship will only work when it is clear that the relationship needs to be both with the person who requires support and with the family or circle member who will be providing the main direction, supervision and guidance. Personality, working styles and values need to be in order for all parties. It is important not to fall into

the false ideas that the only relationship that matters is with the person requiring support.

13. Look out for other elements of match - Important elements of match include age, sometimes gender, and lifestyle. It is important that the support person does not “stick out” in strange ways when the two people are out and about in their community. How the two look together in the eyes of other community members reflects on the person with a disability – it affects their image to others, and this matters. Therefore, we look for general age matching and often gender matching. We look for people who dress casually but not overly so, and well-groomed at the same time.

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14. Each supporter is unique - Part of what we have to do is to figure out the gifts and contributions of this particular candidate. Do they fit what you most need right now? Sometimes, you meet a lovely person with whom you “click” very well – but does not have the availability, flexibility, or potential to stay. It is often better to keep on looking.

15. Believe in the abundance of our communities – There are many people possible for this role in the whole of our community. Look for people who are living and have evidence of living ordinary community woven lives. Many people have the potential for the role in terms of their life experiences, degree to which they are

a part of their community every day, and a caring personality. Much of the rest of the role can be taught.

16. Provide excellence in the orientation period - If anything, this is where we place extra time and energy. Whereas we have tried to streamline our recruiting and interviewing process, many families put as much or more time into orientation. For Brenda, this includes some time and information shared by Barb, the sister-in-law and main family contact. Then, the new person spends some casual time with Brenda visiting for tea, having Brenda show her around her community, looking at photo albums, etc. This is followed by several opportunities to shadow an experienced support person – typically at different times

of the day and even over the weekend, so that the person gets a view of Brenda’s whole week. During these times, supportive neighbours are

pointed out and introduced along the way. Neighbours who have agreed to be contacted in case of need are also identified. Next, the new person arrives with a more experienced support person and after an initial hour, the support person withdraws to another room, another part of the building or farther afield depending on confidence of the new person and Brenda’s current state of mind. The next move is to a whole support period (shift) with the person alone, but with telephone contact as back up. After a few weeks, one of the key people in Brenda’s life (Barb, Diane or myself) will find some time for the new person to talk about how things are going, and begin to deepen our emphasis on home, roles and relationship

and this supporter's role in building this into Brenda's life.

To conclude, this is what we know. These steps will have to be repeated again and again and again. It is best to get used to the idea that good recruitment, interviewing and orientation is an ongoing part of people enjoying a good life. It is best to make it routine and expect it to continue. Brenda's mother, Elizabeth, taught us not to be frustrated by people leaving. She told us that Brenda would have given them so much to bring to their future jobs and lives and a piece of Brenda would go with them. She told us to embrace the new supporter arriving for what they would now have to offer, and what they would come to learn. And we do.

Thanks to Brenda, her sister in law, Barb Boettcher and our whole team for this article and the learning and joint efforts to work together that it represents. Not all team members have been included in the text, but they could have been. They include: Carol Barbeau, Anita Bradner, Matti-Dias Young, Patricia Harmon, Nazalene Khan, Sharla Murray, Frances McNutt, Sharon Pantlitz, Shevana Telfer and Diane Huson, recruiter.

Dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth who got us started.