

# Asking others to be there ~ creating a place for support and friendship to grow

by Margaret Rodgers

**Margaret Rodgers'** commitment to people with disabilities began in a L'Arche community in 1981. She worked with the Mamre Association in Brisbane, where she co-ordinated the Building Informal Networks project which works closely with families and assists young adults with disabilities to move into their own homes and get on with their own lives. Individuals are supported with a range of informal and formal supports. Circles of Support are one of the key strategies. Margaret is now Director of CRU (Community Resource Unit), Brisbane.

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**D**espite many advances in the lives of people with disabilities in recent years, we know that many remain lonely. For some, the only people they see each day are people who are paid to be with them. For others, their parents, close family and possibly some paid workers are the only relationships they have. If only one or two people carry the knowledge and history of the person and oversee the support and safeguarding they require, then this can leave the person quite vulnerable. If only one or two people are dreaming about what is possible for the person and working to make it happen, it can seem a daunting task. But if there are seven or eight heads around the table dreaming and scheming then it is likely that the dreams and the schemes can be bigger and more adventurous. It is just taking the adage that “two heads are better than one” a little bit further.

In growing recognition of these gaps in people's lives, there has been an interest in recent years in intentionally inviting people from the community to get to know people who live with disabilities. This is done with a view to creating a place where friendship can develop or a place where someone can do his or her small piece to support a fuller, richer life for the person with a disability. Friendship can't be forced but it can be fostered and lots of great things can be offered to and shared with fellow citizens, in a friendly way, even if the two people never come to define themselves as friends.

It is not easy to ask people to be involved. The closer we are to the person, the more we fear rejection and

the more we want to protect them from rejection. As askers, we need to be clear and confident of the gifts that the person has to offer.

As most people struggle with the task of asking, it is useful to share what we are learning.

- Find someone to help — this could be at least one person who you really trust to either do the thinking behind the scenes with you; to think through who to invite and what the purpose of inviting them is; or it may be someone to actually do the asking on your behalf.
- Be clear why you are asking — it seems to be beneficial to take some time to think this through. Given the complexity of life, sometimes further down the track, it can be necessary to come back to this point and ask “now why were we doing that again?” If you are clear from the beginning, it will be easier to remember why and get back on track.
- What is it that you want from people? Are you concerned about who would be there for the person if something happened to you? Is it because the person you care about is isolated now and their life looks quite different to other people their age? Do you want to harness some creative thinking about a particular issue. e.g. getting a job, getting enrolled in school.
- Be clear what you are asking for — even very busy people can find time if the request is quite specific. Can you describe what you want, for how long and how often?

- What sort of people are you looking for and how many? Sometimes when we hear about intentionally building friendships using structures known as Circles of Support or Networks it can seem as though you need lots and lots of people. However it is important that whatever steps you take fit with the person you are asking for and with the culture of their family. Some families easily welcome big numbers and thrive on that; others are more private and a few close people would be more comfortable for them.
- As much as we all wish that this just happened and that it didn't need to be manufactured and the subject of conferences and stories in newsletters, the reality seems to be that in 2011 that is still not the case. The doors to an ordinary life still don't open automatically for people who live with disability. Our society gets educated into seeing difference rather than sameness and then loses the ability to relate to and respond to their neighbours who live with disability. They lose the freedom to "just do the ordinary thing".
- People usually need an invitation and some information to feel confident to "just do the ordinary thing" — even close relatives like aunts, uncles and grandparents sometimes don't know what to do or say. Being a little bit formal and inviting them to a planning session or a conversation, which someone else leads, can help to get past that. Giving people information about the person — who they are, what they like, and what help they need — can be done in a respectful way and is usually quite necessary. People can't be expected to just know all of that detail.
- The first steps are the hardest — asking the first person; having the first conversations or making the first connections are always the hardest. Having people say yes builds confidence to ask again. Sometimes the network builds because the people who have said yes then start to ask other people too.
- This can mean letting go of some control — the one or two people who were central (whether workers or family) may not be quite as central anymore. The person might not need them quite as much or in the same way and that can take some adjustment. Sometimes they have to be prepared to step aside so there is space for others to contribute. This can be hard, especially at first

when new people are still learning and might not be doing things too well. This can be one of those moments when it is good to go back to that question of "Why are we doing this?" so that it is easier to stay on track.

- Very few people say no. Despite all our fears of rejection, when people are asked clearly to do quite specific things and are given the information they need, very few say an outright no. They may say "I can't do that at the moment but I could do this" while quite a few say, "I feel so privileged to be asked. I wanted to help but didn't know what to do".
- Over time as they get to know the person and hear what is needed, the need for specific asking may change. In fact, I have seen friends and supporters offer things, which people with disabilities and their families would never have dreamt of asking for... simply because they were present in the person's life, heard what was required and saw a way they could contribute. They have been empowered to "do the ordinary thing".

Please don't take these as "the 11 easy steps to asking people to be involved". They are some of the lessons learnt from and with the people with disabilities and their families that I know, who have taken the risk of asking others to come into their lives.

While it is not always plain sailing, these families all continue to see the benefit of having more people involved in planning, thinking and being with their family members. These are reflections on a place to start and the many reasons to keep going so that our society becomes enriched by the gifts of all its members.