

## RISE UP: HOW TO SUPPORT OTHERS TO RISE TO THE CHALLENGES THAT LIFE PRESENTS

I was invited to offer a key note address at the Reach for the Rainbow Conference last year. My talk was entitled 'Rise Up' and I have been asked to share some of my ideas with you in this article.

The concept of 'Rise Up' comes from my vision of someone gaining, growing, gathering momentum. I imagine people with disabilities having the power to meet and rise above the challenges faced on a daily basis. My life goal has been to be part of a world that respects and facilitates the power of each individual member. I believe that people who have disabilities are marginalized in so many ways that it is difficult to understand their lives. I also believe that 'bad things' have been done with the best of intentions by those who have not thought through what they are doing and how it affects others.

When I was waiting to offer my talk, I noted that the hall was full of young, energetic, eager young adults who were willing to dedicate their summer and perhaps future years to support people who have disabilities. I wanted to 'fast track' the learnings of the camp counsellors to avoid some of my mistakes. I hoped to plant the seeds of ideas that would grow into best practice skills over the years. I chose those seeds that were strongest and most likely to take root in the fertile minds of the audience.

### ► **I AM MORE THAN THE SUM OF MY SCORES**

Too often children with disabilities are described by their age-equivalent or language level with statements such as, "*He is eight but he has the mind of a three-year-old*" or "*She functions as a 6-year-old.*" Statements such as these limit children to having only one dimension, to having no dynamic attributes other than one solitary measure. Every human being has both strengths and weaknesses and should never be described by one weakness or attribute. I know a 10-year-old boy with the physical attributes of a gymnast, the expressive language skills in the five year range but who understands every word I say to him. He also has the power and determination of a 13-year-old. I know a seven-year-old girl who cannot talk, cannot see very well and will never walk without help, and she has a great sense of humor, loves music, can sing better than me and plays the piano by ear. She dreams of sunny days with friends and loves to listen to stories about animals. Both of these children are unique and it would be a travesty if they were described by some test score.

**SEED:** When talking about people with a disability, talk about them as a whole person and focus on their unique combination of strengths and skills.

### ► **HAVE A VISION RATHER THAN A WORRY**

People who look into the future are visionaries; great leaders did not look into the future and fret about everything that could go wrong. They created a vision and worked towards that vision with whatever support they could muster. Often, when people look into the future of children with disabilities, they talk about all the things that could go wrong; we focus on the barriers, on limitations and on our own fears. It is critical that you have a vision of success, that the vision drives your actions in an upward-onward direction. When we have a clear vision of success, we overcome obstacles on our way to the goal. Too often, it is non-disabled individuals who limit the achievements of disabled individuals who ask only for the opportunity to be given a chance to try and succeed, or to try and fail but at least to try.

**SEED:** Create a strong positive vision or goal and work towards that vision with all of your energy and drive.

► **TREAT ME AS IF**

Following closely on the above idea, I also believe that rather than focusing on what could go wrong, we should focus on what could go right. This following letter is an excellent example of what I mean.

*Dear Carol,*

*I just wanted to send you a quick message to tell you about a cool thing that happened for me after listening to you speak on the weekend. I have three children, 12, 10 and 9. My 9-year-old son, Alex has Down syndrome. I usually pick up my children after school and drive them home. Yesterday was a beautiful day and my 10-year-old daughter wanted to walk home with some friends. Alex wanted to walk with them – it's about a 10 minute walk crossing three streets. I have never let him before. Something that you said stuck in my mind and that was "WHAT IF..." I thought what if something happened on his way home and then I remembered – what if it doesn't? The look of joy on my children's faces when they got home together was priceless (and I only drove by once to check on them). I just wanted to say thank you.*

**SEED:** If we don't give people a chance to succeed, they won't.

Whenever you are in a helping/support relationship with individuals who are disabled, your every action will either hinder or help them. If you truly wish to be helpful, focus on strengths, work towards positive goals and see success around each corner. That is how you will support every camper to grow while at camp and into their futures.

Each person in the audience was given a small star as a symbol of their 'great task' as described in the poem, 'The Star Polisher', adapted from Leah Becks.

By: Carol Johnson, Chaos Consultation

About the author: Carol Johnson is an author, behavior consultant and educator in the field of disabilities. She travels extensively offering information and advice to programs, schools and families on how to build strong positive relationships.

Reach for the Rainbow was pleased to invite her to deliver the keynote address at the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference. We acknowledge Sick Kids Foundation for the grant that made this possible. LOGO

Adapted from: THE STAR POLISHER  
BY: LEAH BECKS

I HAVE A GREAT JOB IN THE UNIVERSE OF OCCUPATIONS.

WHAT DO I DO?  
I AM A 'STAR POLISHER'

IT'S A VERY IMPROTANT JOB.  
IF YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW IMPORTANT,  
JUST GO OUT AT NIGHT AND LOOK AT THE STARS TWINKLING AND SPARKLING.

YOU SEE, I AM A CAMP COUNSELLER.  
THE STARS ARE THE CHILDREN THAT COME TO CAMP  
MY JOB IS TO TAKE THEM IN – IN WHATEVER SHAPE THEY COME – AND SHINE AND BUFF THEM, AND THEN  
SEND THEM OUT TO TAKE THEIR PLACES AS BRIGHT LITTLE TWINKLING BEACONS IN THE SKY.

THEY COME IN THE SUMMER IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES.  
SOMETIMES THEY'RE BENT, TARNISHED, DIRTY, CRINKLY AND BROKEN.  
SOME STARS ARE CUDDLY, SOFT AND SWEET.  
SOME STARS ARE PRICKLY AND THORNY.

AS I BUFF, POLISH, TRAIN AND TEACH MY LITTLE STARS, I TELL THEM THAT THE WORLD CANNOT DO WITHOUT  
THEM.  
I TELL THEM THEY CAN DO ANYTHING THEY SET THEIR MINDS TO DO.  
I TELL THEM THEY CAN BE THE BRIGHTEST, SHINIEST STARS IN THE SKY AND THE WORLD WILL BE A BETTER  
PLACE BECAUSE OF THEM.

EACH NIGHT AS I LOOK AT THE SKY, I'M REMINDED OF MY VERY IMPORTANT JOB AND AWESOME  
RESPONSIBILITY.  
I GO AND GET MY SOFT BUFFING CLOTH AND MY BOTTLE OF POLISH IN PREPERATION FOR TOMORROW AND  
FOR MY GROUP OF LITTLE STARS.