



IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

An Essay by

Marsha Forest

Learning & Teaching with Common Sense

It's About Teaching

It's About Relationships

Inclusion Press is re-printing the three (above listed)
essays by Marsha Forest, in celebration of the
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INCLUSION PRESS

47 Indian Trail

Toronto, ON M6R 1Z8

tel. 416.658.5363

fax. 416.658.5067

inclusionpress@inclusion.com

inclusion.com

2011 Prologue

These three booklets are republished on the occasion of the 25th Summer Institute - to honour the visionary leadership of dozens of families and individuals whose passion created the Summer Institutes.

The Summer Institutes began in 1984. They emerged from the creative frustration of families, individuals, educators, organizations - who were passionate about 'integration' (the term of the era) and could not find any place - any 'home' - to develop and nurture their beliefs, their ideals and dreams. So an 'institute' invented itself. Marsha Forest was the driving force - the catalyst - in the creation of the Summer Institutes on Inclusion, Community and Diversity. Marsha wrote and spoke with power and passion and thus gathered a team of families and friends who collectively created it. The first was under the sponsorship of the University of Syracuse at NIMR, (the National Institute on Mental Retardation) in 1984.

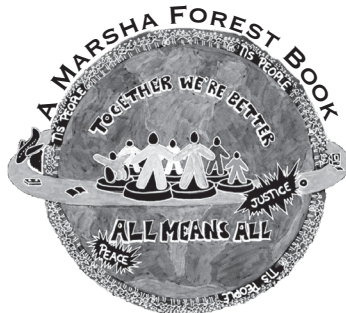
These three booklets were originally published by Frontier College (when Jack was its President and Marsha was its Director of Education). They are re-published now to acknowledge our shared and diverse roots in building the movement from which the Summer Institutes emerged. We pay tribute to the relentless and selfless work and spirit of thousands of families and individuals, service providers, and courageous pioneers whose energy is reflected in Marsha's stories and zealous commitment to capacity. They reflect the 'open space' approach from which the Institute idea emerged.

The Summer Institutes have continued and blossomed. We honour twenty-five iterations here – and dozens more creative spinoffs in countries around the world. And we continue to evolve, to provide leading edge supports to individuals, families and supporters, as we continue our struggles to create a society where ALL live full, participating and contributing lives in our communities.

Jack Pearpoint, Inclusion Press

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MARSHA FOREST (1942-2000) INSPIRED OTHERS WITH HER PASSIONATE AND UNCOMPROMISING ADVOCACY FOR INCLUSION. A MARSHA FOREST BOOK COMMUNICATES IN HER SPIRIT.

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INTRODUCTION

The message in Alice Walker's beautiful children's book *To Hell With Dying* speaks volumes to me personally. All I really ever wanted in my own life was a group of people around me and especially one central person in my life who would just love me totally as I am.

For years the people in my own life and family said they loved me, but I felt they never really knew me. The men in my life said they loved me, but all the while they tried to change me, criticize me, or pick at me. I tried and tried to be perfect and I felt worse and worse.

I was successful at work. Nobody knew when my heart was breaking. I thought this was good. I could control my feelings. I'd be tough at work and crack up at home. I, who love life so dearly, thought about death, dying, suicide – I lost weight. I cried in hidden places.

And then at the age of 34 something snapped. I visited another culture in Asia and the distance from home and the strangeness of the land and people opened my heart and soul. I decided I wanted to fly – that is, to be free of the past and I opened myself to love.

At this very time of change I met people who changed my life both personally and professionally – Jack Pearpoint

and Judith Snow. They are both entwined with me on this journey to create a world where people are loved for who they are and cherished for the gifts they have to offer.

I have started this essay with a bit of my own journey as I feel it is important to stress the universality of my theme and that universality must begin with myself. I did not get involved in the movement to integrate children with disabilities into regular schools because I am a saint, a martyr or a "Christian." I am indeed far from being a saint, I despise martyrs, and I'm not a Christian – my own heritage is in the Jewish tradition.

I am not at all interested in disability, mental retardation or special education. I am, however passionately interested in being part of building a just and human society where each human being can live in dignity and have his/her needs met – whatever that may involve.

I strongly believe we have the money and the resources to do the above.

FORCE ONE

Picture for a moment a white sleek airplane called Force One. Its nose is pointed, sharp and black. This plane has three 15-foot (4.57m) one weapon bays. Each can carry and eight-round drum of SAM missiles plus other cruise missiles. In addition, 14 cruise missiles can be hung on the external pylons.

In 1981, U.S. President Ronald Reagan announced a force of 100 B1B Bombers – a prototype of the B1 – to enter service in 1988 at a cost of \$28 billion.

This, to me, is insane and obscene. The cost is beyond my wildest notions of money. I know Judith Snow needs \$60,000 to run a decent attendant care system. I know that \$5,000 would go a long way to help the Frank family. Let's be honest ... money in the trillions is there for weapons that kill, maim and destroy the human race. Can you imagine if we used that money to help people?

To talk about integration without looking at the wider social issues of war, poverty, illiteracy, etc. is foolish. The school systems in the U.S. and Canada are falling apart at the seams for at least 75% of the population. These are some of the grave social and political problems that face us.

We are looking at and for major social change and the movement to bring children back into real classes where they belong is simply one part of a wider social movement to create a just society which is fit for human existence.

Is this possible? YES! Will it happen tomorrow or without an enormous amount of hard work? NO.

THE CHALLENGE

Bringing people who have been excluded on the basis of race, class, sex or handicapping condition back into the mainstream is an exciting, controversial and dynamic process for it challenges the basic assumptions of each of us and at the same time introduces us to new ways of thinking and seeing.

I was not born thinking like I do today. I accepted the notion that people with disabilities needed institutions, special care, special education, special housing. I, however, was open to being challenged (at times yelled at) by friends who saw another way.

As I got to know my friend Judith Snow and as I became involved in her struggle to get out of a chronic care nursing home, I learned about the reality of life for most people with disabilities. I was angry and disgusted at the injustice of it all.

Judith was my friend. How could she stand to live in a prison – or as she called it a “concentration camp.” How could she put up with all that disrespect and pain? She had two choices – live or die.

I learned that when you love people as they are, you stand with them and fight with them and laugh and cry with them. You don't try to change, adjust or cure them. You want the best for your friends and in return those friends want the best for you.

You won't take the "least restrictive environment" – you want the BEST, the MOST. You never want the least for those you love.

But the attitudes of wanting perfection start at birth (or today even before with the trend to wipe out all children with down syndrome through amniocentesis). Just this week a friend of ours gave birth to a three-pound baby who is said to be "profoundly" brain damaged. She was supposed to die. But this tough little girl didn't die.

The advice given by physicians to the family in 1989 in a supposedly progressive hospital in Vancouver, British Columbia is "don't bond with the baby – she will probably die, or at best be a burden to you for the rest of your lives."

The young couple are told daily by medical experts and family members not to LOVE their child. What kind of world is this where we tell parents not to love a child? No one has any idea what this baby will become. She may be dead in a week or live to be the oldest woman alive. No one can predict.

The message NOT TO LOVE is insane, mean, cruel, and horrible. Love the baby if it's perfect. Hate the baby if it's imperfect in any way. Love me if I live the life you want. Hate me if I am not perfect in your eyes. Throw me away if I am different. Get rid of me if I am unique.

The implication is horrible – I will love you as long as

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you are perfect – not if you are in a car accident, if you lose a leg, if you become hard-of-hearing, and if you become old and unattractive then I will stop loving you. I will put you away and I will reject you.

It starts in the hospital – it too often ends in a nursing home.

Luckily most families fall in love with their babies and love them despite the best advice from doctors – (these great fortune tellers of the future of a newborn).

And so the child is loved and welcomed to the family but then the child hits school age and the curtain drops again.

The child is not welcomed in his/her neighborhood school – rather he/she is sent to that SPECIAL place where SPECIAL people do SPECIAL things to the SPECIAL person and in reality absolutely nothing special is going on at all. Segregated schooling is a holding action.

Until adulthood when more SPECIAL places called group homes or sheltered workshops or day programs do more of nothing special and the only un-special place that child ever ends up in is the regular cemetery where he/she is as we all will be one day – dead.

But while we are alive we have the right to live, to love, to have fun, to make mistakes and to fly in our own direction with our own friends.

THE KARATE CLASS

Why can't the school system act more like my Karate Class?

I recently joined the Northern Karate Club on St. Clair Avenue in Toronto. Terrified, I went to my first class dressed in an old sweat suit feeling terribly out of place among all the "karatyites" decked out in crisp white suits with colourful belts.

It was the all belts class – this means all levels of ability (including me with absolutely no ability at all). I was afraid. I felt foolish and out of place. I was motivated however by my age, five extra pounds I wanted to shed and the knowledge that I better practice what I preach – i.e. Take better care of myself.

I also have a high tolerance for making a total fool of myself knowing full well most people are not looking at me anyway. The Sensei (i.e. Head teacher Caesar Borowkowski) told me that I was to work at my own speed and push myself and not worry about others. I liked that.

The woman teaching the class that day assigned Patty Piletti to be my tutor. Now she didn't say that – she just asked Patty to make sure I didn't kill myself in my first lesson and to keep an eye on me.

Patty is a black belt – the top. She is 23 years old, a pro. She gently guided me through the exercises helping place my feet in the right position and always making me feel I

was doing okay.

I went home elated. I had lived through a karate class at the age of 46. I punched and kicked and screamed Japanese sounding phrases. I was sore in body but elated in spirit!

Most of all, as I dashed into my house, I was brimming over with the idea that integration is alive and well out there in the world – families, in Karate studios, in health clubs, in work places. WHY NOT IN OUR SCHOOLS??

In subsequent Karate classes I have always been the “white belt” i.e. The lowest level and my goal is to get a “yellow belt.” I plan to invite the entire neighborhood to my yellow belt party as for me that will be as great an achievement as getting a black belt!

The moral of the story is that I experienced integration/inclusion first hand and I loved it. I was not the best in the class (I can honestly say I was the worst) however, I work diligently at my own pace, I have tutors, I am making friends (much younger than myself) and I am improving with each class I take.

I was welcomed and included from the first moment I walked into the studio. There was no pressure, only much support. I know schools can do this too, for I am privileged to work in schools and systems where all children are fully welcomed. If one place can do it so can every place. It is a matter of will, choice and values. It is our future.

THE WEDDING

On July 23, 1988 about 300 people celebrated the marriage of Judith Snow and Laurence Hunt at the Eglinton United Church in Toronto, Ontario. It was ten years since I had met Judith and neither she nor I had dared to dream that this day could ever really happen.

It is a day etched in my heart and in my mind. I have now known Judith Snow for over ten years – years of change and years of struggle. When we met did we dare dream that ten years later Judith would be living in an apartment of her own, with an attendant care system designed and managed by her circle of friends and advocates (the Joshua Committee) and married? Inclusion into community doesn't begin with a blueprint, but often with a simple dream, desire, a hope, a yet unspoken cry for freedom. Judith's dream was not spelled out in detail – it was more a scream of despair that said, "Get me out of this institutional hell hole and let me see the light. "I want to be free!"

That light, that anger, that drive and determination, and her courage radiated with clarity and brilliance as Judith, dressed in a white cotton dress from Thailand, came up the specially built ramp at the church to meet her husband-to-be at the altar. The hush in the church was thunderous as everyone watched love roll up the ramp that day. The musicians played the song "Power of Love" by Jennifer Rush. Tears of joy flowed.

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Judith was followed by her four attendants dressed in identical dresses of different colours and Laurence (also dressed in white) was attended by his four friends.

We ten were led by a male and female minister who officiated at the ceremony designed and written by Judith and Laurence themselves.

The radiant bride and groom designed the ceremony to dedicate their new life together to the service of others and to bring their community into that mission with them.

This was a wedding that involved the participants in building the vision of the new community that Judith and Laurence plan to build.

At the beginning of their service all the children were invited to come forward and sit on the steps of the stage area while Judith and Laurence explained to them why they were getting married. They asked the children for their support and assistance in building a world where no one would be shut out in jails, hospitals, segregated schools, segregated classes and institutions of any kind.

There wasn't a dry eye in the house as Judith and Laurence spoke to the assembled children – many of them in wheelchairs, many of them rejected by their own neighborhood churches and schools. Today all were accepted – today all were welcome.

The music through the ceremony, played by a small

band, was chosen to accent the proceedings. It was uplifting as they sang with their young vibrant voices.

As Judith and Laurence spoke their vows, the community was asked to join in and pledge their support for the newly joined couple. A rousing "WE WILL!" was the answer to the traditional wedding question.

Instead of the usual Christian communion line, the wedding party took baskets of bread and grapes out to the over 300 guests as music played and all shook hands or hugged or laughed and cried together.

Judith and Laurence beamed as the entire congregation became a community, sharing love and commitment with one another.

This was no ordinary service. It was not simply joining two people in marriage – it was joining an entire community into true communion and dedication, not to self, but to building community and service to others.

Everyone present could not help but be touched by the symbolic nature of the event. Everyone present had been in some way part of Judith's struggle to reach this day.

Through planning this day, Judith and her parents came to a new and deeper appreciation of one another. Judith's Mother (Rita Snow) presented a tapestry that had taken her almost a year to sew that represented Judith's journey. The biological family had come together with Judith's

"friendship" family. Laurence's Mother was also present, and kept wondering how she could possibly describe this event to her friends back in Missouri.

The wedding was integration in action. Everyone was represented – young and old, men and women, rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight. It was a celebration of diversity, but most of all it was a celebration of the possible. It was a kaleidoscope in full and living colour.

For those of us who remembered the "Judy" of nine years ago, it was a triumph of courage, cooperation, partnerships, and circles. "Judy" had truly become Judith, and as her namesake in the old testament she was a noble and courageous mother of a community she had given birth to.

"Judy and Larry" had become Judith Snow and Laurence Hunt and together they will be even stronger than each has been alone. This is the wedding that, according to all the medical experts, human service policy makers, etc. could and should never have happened. But it did happen. An once again, it happened because of a dream and the hard work needed to make that dream a reality. The wedding was planned by a circle - a committee of friends, church and family members. As with all aspects of Judith's life, it became a true celebration of living.

Guests came from all over North America and Europe. Of the many speeches after the dinner, for me it was the image of the "two Bob's" that stands out in my mind.

Bob Perske and Bob Williams had flown in from the U.S.

They stood together and as Bob Williams pointed to letters on his letter board, Bob Perske translated loud and clear: "This wedding is the true meaning of community."

After wedding toasts and food , more tears and lots of laughter, everyone partied and joyously danced the night away. If you ask, maybe Judith and Laurence will show you their photo album. The photographs, taken not by a professional photographer but by a friend, reflect the magic and love of this celebration.

A decade ago Judith Snow decided she would rather die than live alone in an institution. Ten years later, Judith Snow got married and proved once again that dreams indeed can become reality.

*When you dream alone it is only a dream, but when
you dream together it is the beginning of reality.*

-Dom Helder Camera

THE EMPEROR IS NAKED: THE MYTH OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

I think we've lost our hearts to a myth of special education. We've created a new breed of magician, witch doctor, a teacher/car mechanic who we believe can "fix" children like we "fix" cars. But children aren't cars, they are flesh and blood. They bleed real blood and cry real tears when hurt.

I too came form this "magician" mode of thinking. I am a trained special educator. I taught in segregated schools

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and classes and I did the best I could at the time given what I then knew. But I changed!

I realized that the power of the segregated environment was teaching negative messages daily. The environment said, "You are not good enough to be part of the real school. You need special education" and this really means, "We don't want you with us." I realized that no matter how good a teacher I was, I couldn't give my students what they needed most – real experiences and real relationships in a real school/real classroom.

I saw that the Emperor (special education) was naked (not working). I didn't think I was bad, evil or horrible – I just saw that there was something better out there not only for my students but for me and my own family.

We need to shout this news from the rooftops – ALL CHILDREN NEED TO LEARN WITH AND FROM OTHER CHILDREN...ALL CHILDREN NEED TO BELONG AND FEEL WANTED AND LOVED...ALL CHILDREN NEED TO HAVE FUN AND ENJOY NOISE AND LAUGHTER IN THEIR LIVES...ALL CHILDREN NEED TO TAKE RISKS AND FALL AND CRY AND GET HURT...ALL CHILDREN NEED TO BE IN REAL FAMILIES AND REAL SCHOOLS AND REAL NEIGHBOURHOODS.

A few days ago I was at a meeting enthusiastically telling stories of children I know who are fully included in regular schools and classrooms. A young teacher interrupted me.

“But what about getting Melanie to the bathroom?” she asked. “How can she go to the bathroom – she has no arms! It’s just not practical.”

I have always suspected that what drives most of special education is a preoccupation with bathrooms, toilet training and bowel movements. Now I was sure this was true. “But what was really underling this teacher’s preoccupation with the bathroom?” I asked myself. My answer: FEAR.

The teacher was afraid of the unknown .She was afraid to admit her fear. She was afraid she might not know what to do with Melanie. She, as most of us, feared anything new and different. But instead of talking about FEAR she talked about the bathroom.

I wanted to scream at this teacher. “How can you be so ignorant - how can you be so cruel – how can you think of bathrooms when this kid needs friends, love, education. How can you be so out of it?”

Instead of screaming however, I took a deep breath and asked her what she wanted for her own son. I said,“ God forbid your son was in a car accident today and he had to have a wheelchair to walk and a communication device to

speaking with me from today on. Where would you want him to go to school when he gets out of the hospital? Where do you think he'd want to live and work and play?"

"Well, of course I'd want him to live at home and go back to his class," she answered without hesitation. "Oh, I see what you're getting at," she said with a wise smile.

I then more calmly went on, "You see how we move to all the wrong issues out of our own ignorance, prejudice and fear and we lose sight of the real needs of children."

Let's look at some of the ridiculous things we do:

- If a child needs more relationships – we give him less: we will meaningfully assign an educational assistant and build a one-to-one dependency.
- If a child needs more time – we give her less hours at school and more hours riding around town to "segregation land" in a "special bus."
- If a child needs normal behavior models – we give him six other kids, who scream, as his "pals" and then we wonder why he doesn't improve.
- If a child needs more communication – we put her in a room with ten other kids who don't communicate well and again we wonder why she won't learn.

**THE ABOVE IS CALLED CRAZY-MAKING BEHAVIOUR
AND IT HAS TO STOP – NOW!!**

Children don't need segregated community-based experiences in supermarkets. They need to go shopping with their classmates when the need arises. Children at age ten don't need jobs outside of school; they need to do errands in the school that are typical for ten-year-olds. High school kids need to build relationships so that their friends and the mothers and fathers of their friends who own stores or work in factories will encourage their co-workers to hire their son's friend. Most people get jobs through personal networks, not simply job experience programs.

Surely if we can put men and women on the moon, we can figure out how to get a five year old to the washroom and how to get a 21 year old a job! It is all pure nonsense that we can't do it. It is simply a matter of will.

**GRADE 7/8 ST. FRANCIS SCHOOL:
MY GREAT TEACHERS OF 1989!!**

Integration is happening. Several school systems in Canada and the United States are proving that true inclusion can work. These school boards are good places for ALL children. They have policies of equality on issues involving racial minorities, women, etc. They believe that EACH BELONGS.

Once one system can do it, it forces everyone else to prove why they can't. It is no longer up to us to show why integration can work. We know it can. It is up to others to show why they can't do it.

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We know the blocks aren't money or staff. We know it is strong leadership and clear values that make the difference. We need to applaud those who believe in love and inclusion and expose those who would create a new elite in our schools.

When the staff decided to welcome all children back into their regular classes at St. Francis Elementary School (Waterloo Region Separate School Board) we simply went to talk to the children and ask them what they thought about this issue.

Their questions and responses touched everyone involved. (The reader can watch and hear these children in the video *With A Little Help From My Friends*.) Some of their questions were:

- "Why did we segregate May in the first place?"
- "What was Jason learning in the "life-skills" room anyway – nothing I think."
- "How would you feel if you weren't with kids your own age and had to go on "special" trips to the circus, bowling and that stuff."

We had to answer these and other questions. Entering into honest dialogue with children wasn't always easy for the teachers. "I know how to teach these kids, but I've forgotten how to talk to them," one teacher admitted.

We asked the children how they would feel if they had no friends, if no one ever called them, and if they were

never expected to go to parties, sports events, etc. with their friends. We explained that most people with disabilities had few people in their lives other than those paid to be in their lives. How would that make you feel?

"I'd feel old."

"I'd want to die."

"I'd feel like I was in jail."

"I'd think only the teachers were my friends."

"I'd commit suicide."

And so all the children previously in segregated classes were "welcomed home."

Everyone was nervous, no one knew what individual programs would look like, but with teamwork and support everyone survived and indeed thrived. Today the Waterloo Region of the Separate School Board is a model. People flock to Kitchener from all over the world to see inclusion in process.

If you visit you won't see the perfect school or system. It is far from perfect but it is on the road. It is, after all, just a school system and has the problems that beset most schools in 1989 but there's a real difference.

IN THE WATERLOO REGION, IT'S NOT FOR THEM – IT'S FOR US!

Too often integration or mainstreaming has been seen as a placement issue. It is something we do for or to "them."

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But integration isn't another "charity ball" for the disabled. Integration in the true sense of the word (meaning making whole) is for US ALL. It truly takes the philosopher Martin Buber's concept of "I-Thou" and puts it into action.

All too often I see "I-It" relationships in schools between pupils or between pupil and teacher and too often between teacher and teacher.

Bringing back children who have been historically left out also brings back our humanity. You can't teach the value of love or diversity or tolerance by preaching or lecturing AT people – we all have to live these values and have real situations to test our morality and humanity.

"But, tell me how to do it," teachers in frustration ask me. Those who truly understand the *why* seem to do the *what* quite easily. What to do comes out of a team problem-solving process of adults and children who together come up with creative solutions to unique challenges.

It is impossible to train people in the abstract to do this kind of work. There is no way to do in-service for this NEW WAY OF THINKING except to have the children present and discuss values and attitudes, cry and laugh together and work cooperatively as problems arise. It is no longer the lone ranger teacher having to come up with the answer. It is the whole school and community, parents, consultants, and most of all, the children who can help.

A TRUE STORY

About a year after May had been fully included in Grade 7/8, she and some her friends went to a neighboring school yard to play. Some Grade 8 boys from the other school started teasing a child in a wheelchair. The girls, smaller by far than these boys, hesitated for a moment before they took on these bullies.

Amy, the leader of the girls told the boys to stop. They didn't. She persisted. Amy was, by this time, furious. When they got back to school they stormed into the principal's office and wanted him to take immediate action against these bullies at School X.

I visited the class soon after the incident and asked everyone to tell me what had happened. A lively debate ensued about whether Amy and her friends should have gotten involved.

Some of the children felt Amy had been "foolish," "stupid," "naïve," etc. to take on boys much bigger and stronger than herself. "She could have been hurt," some felt.

Amy was indignant. "You have to stand up for what's right," she argued. Her friends (including May) chimed in arguing for what was right and decent according to them.

I widened the conversation by asking what they thought the role of students in South Africa today is and indeed,

what happened in Nazi Germany when non-Jewish children befriended Jewish children.

The room was in an uproar of incredible philosophical debate. I was struck that the level of discussion was far more sophisticated than among several of my graduate seminars at the university. The discussion was thoughtful, deep and passionate.

The issue in the Waterloo Region has gone far beyond “integration” and ranged into the real meaning of community, social justice and the integrity of each individual. I was impressed, moved and thrilled to see this ordinary group of working class children handling the “big” ideas that we so infrequently allow children to discuss.

This was beyond curriculum guides on individual differences. This was REAL. This wasn't an abstract discussion about wooden puppets with different disabilities – this was about the meaning of life itself.

MICROWAVE THINKING AND FEELING

Society today wants the quick fix, the quick high. Teachers seek out the “answer.” Well, we mustn't give in. Good teachers know that real learning takes time and that education is a journey and a process.

Inclusion won't cook fast in the microwave. Inclusive education means commitment and energy of a different kind. It needs teachers who can talk to children, touch

them, teach them and laugh and cry with them.

The learning going on in the Waterloo Region under the gutsy and able leadership of George Flynn, the Director of Education, is like a jewel. It shines and it lasts. Amy and Becky and May and Susie and the crew in Grade 8 don't know anything about special education. I hope they never will.

WHAT WE NEED TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN: We need more leadership with the guts and courage displayed by Amy, May, Becky, and others. We need more educational leaders who take the time to read and think and who know the research on what makes an effective school. We need more leaders who still love and care about ALL kids. We need leaders who will dare to expose special education as an empty shell and who have the courage to move ahead into the year 2000.

Special Education is an idea whose time is up. It is now time to build inclusive communities where together we can teach our nation to love as well as to read and write. We need most of all to believe fully and finally that ALL truly means ALL.

We need to act now because as Amy said, "It's not fair to treat some people like they don't belong."

CONCLUSION

Working with hurt and rejected people is not always easy. It takes time, energy and the power of love. There are no simple answers except that we must do it because if we don't, the human cost to us and our children will be enormous.

The greatest diseases in North America today are loneliness and meaninglessness. Bringing back the least powerful into our schools is an incredible antidote to the consequence of these diseases – suicide, alcoholism and drugs. Helping one another is a beautiful thing, but it's not something you simply talk about – it is something you do.

About eight years ago Sherry arrived at our home when we had just discovered we could not have biological offspring. Through a series of strange events, this lost and lonely teenager came through our front door not to leave again for many years.

Sherry had been neglected and abused by her father, and her mother was deceased. She trusted no one, most of all herself. She tests my very soul.

I was good with kids who were physically or mentally handicapped but Sherry, who presented no outward manifestation of handicap, drove me crazy. I learned that she has the most terrible handicap of all – self hate.

Through the years we stuck it out. It wasn't easy or nice but it was honest and real at all times.

The story has a happy ending. Sherry and Lorne were married in our home three years ago. Today they have a beautiful baby named Sarah. As I was writing this essay, Sherry gave me a letter that I will end with. She, who withstood years of abuse by the child welfare system, is now standing up to the same human service system that almost killed her as a child.

Sherry is now working with parents of children with disabilities and getting in trouble for taking on the bureaucrats. She is proud of herself and we are proud of her. She (with her enthusiastic permission) gets the last word in this essay. She and I and Jack and Judith and Laurence and our circle of friends are what it's all about.

Sherry's letter:

Tonight when I spoke to the Board of my organization, I was calm and confident because you were all with me – Lorne and Carrie and David and Marsha and Jack and Tanya and Judith and Vanessa and Andrea and Barb and most of all my dear, sweet Sarah, my living, breathing link with the future.

I wasn't defensive. I didn't yell or cry. I spoke with my heart and each word seemed to bring with it some healing.

People were listening to me – me, this useless nothing that the social service saw fit to abuse and abuse and who wished would just go away and die, because I had nothing to offer, no gift, no nothing.

Tonight this nothing just became something. For the first time in sixteen years I know I am going to make it. For sixteen years I still accepted their vision of me. Now, finally after sixteen years, I am putting all the labels they put on me where they belong – in the garbage! I am going to make it with a little help from my friends. I am going to put the power back where it belongs – with me – with us!

Tonight I sit here overflowing with love and gratitude for all of you and all you have done for me – for your friendship and caring. For sixteen years I have been walking around with a knife stuck in my back – you have all helped me to pull it out. The sharp pain is subsiding, slowly the skin will regenerate and the scar will fade – never completely though. But now what I will remember is not just the wound but the friends who helped me heal.

This is your victory too and I want all my friends to share it with me. I hope someday to make a difference in somebody else's life you have all made in mine.

I hope my beautiful Sarah and her children and friends will grow up without ever knowing the awful pain of being excluded and being utterly and totally alone. I want to help build a loving community out there that will embrace every child. I want the community to see the lovely gifts all our children have to offer.

Marsha Forest

If only all children and parents could receive the love I feel today then the world would truly be a better place for us all.

Thank you all. I love you.

Sherry

March 1989

**For resources on
Person-Centered Planning and
Community capacity building:
www.inclusion.com**