Dear Friends of ACT,

My friend and colleague Al Condeluci spoke in Columbia a few days ago on “Understanding Community and Social Capital”. As always (I've known Al more than twenty years), his message was passionate and energetic.

Much of my message here is an attempt to restate Al's themes. (Thanks, Al.) He's developed a formula for building social capital. (If you're a fan of CBS's “The Big Bang Theory”, Dr. Sheldon Cooper developed one, too. Sheldon's algorithm for making friends was inspired by a children's book. Google “The Big Bang Theory - The Friendship Algorithm”. I promise you'll laugh.)

Al maintains Stu the Cockatoo wasn't Sheldon's inspiration for the friendship algorithm after all. It was something Al wrote.

Here's Condeluci's four-step recipe:

1. Identify a key area of interest/affinity,
2. Find a matching group or community,
3. Understand that community's culture, and
4. Find a gatekeeper.

Why is this important to our work?

Often persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities need help building a bridge to the community. This formula works for everyone.

And...with this approach there's absolutely nothing about the person we're supporting that needs to change or be “fixed”: All people fit in, just as they are, regardless of any difference.

The “profession-focused” approaches we've used in the past are backwards. We'd assemble a room full of people with letters behind their names (Ph.D., MSW, M.D., LCSW, OT, PT, etc.) and then work to teach skills identified by the professionals. We expected the people we support to adapt to the community.

Rather, it's really the communities, the people who need to learn. And they do. Once they see what everyone shares in common, the people who comprise these interest groups expand their thinking about differences and get past what was once an uncomfortable barrier.

Forget readiness. All of the interest groups, clubs, and communities of which we are a part can welcome everyone now!

What's more, finding affinity groups is easier than ever with on-line resources like www.meetup.com.

Let's all push past our inclination to want to fix people with disabilities. Instead, let's be gatekeepers, the ones who open the door, make introductions, focus on shared interests, and most importantly, give newcomers the instant “cred” they deserve to have standing within our communities.

Until next month.

Mark Hassemer
Executive Director, ACT

April, 2014
ACS Career Specialists Need Detailed Knowledge of Employer and Job Seeker

One of ACT Career Services’ (ACS) functions is to help individuals find careers; not just any jobs, but jobs that fit perfectly and will help them achieve their career goals. They must be careers that maximize the chances of success, according to the job seekers’ definitions of success.

This task is taken on by Career Specialists in ACS.

Career Specialists fulfill many roles. They are mentors, teachers, coaches, cheerleaders, and outgoing sales people. “They wear many hats,” says David West, Career Development Manager.

“We are in the business of teaching people how to find a job, and to discover and follow their own bliss,” Says West. “And, we want to work ourselves out of a job.”

Career Specialists teach the whole process of getting a job, from where and how to look, to preparing for and nailing an interview. Finally, they provide support to employees and businesses alike to assist people with achieving long-term success.

Getting to know the individuals is key. It’s essential. And it is a major aspect of the Career Specialist’s work. He or she must discover a job seeker’s skills, abilities, and goals for employment, then provide support and training so a job seeker can effectively advocate for himself or herself.

“Our clients learn what they have to offer and how to build rapport in the application and interview process,” says West.

Career Specialist also identify potential employers by building relationships with area businesses. They want to meet recruiting needs by matching employers up with applicants who are right for the position. This is mastered by knowing the business inside and out.

The puzzle is complete when the client has gained appropriate skills to obtain employment in the community, and the employer’s needs are met by the perfectly qualified employee.

Josef Felten is a Career Specialist who for the past 2 years has been involved with STEP interns at Boone Hospital. “I enjoy working with this younger age group,” Felten states. “It is fulfilling to help them find employment once they transition out of STEP.”

Felten has seen much success! In the first year of the STEP program, one of the intern obtained full-time employment at Boone Hospital. This February, another intern was hired by Schnuck’s as a maintenance associate. Several of the other interns are also working in careers that highlight their talents.

Thank you, ACS Career Specialists. Your efforts to connect job seekers with partnering businesses are working!
Developmental Disabilities Awareness month is wrapping up and Autism Awareness month in April is upon us. Individuals, parents, guardians and staff frequently want to know how they can be better advocates.

I believe the first step to becoming a good advocate is to have an understanding of Person First Language. Language has power that can be both positive and negative. It is important to always refer to a person first, not their disability.

It is equally important to remember that referring to someone’s disability is only necessary if it is relevant to the conversation or situation. All people have defining characteristics that make up who they are. For some people, disability is simply one characteristic of who they are as a person.

It is also important to remember that all people have different perspectives. I know some individuals who have autism who refer to themselves as autistic, rather than as a person with autism. I believe that is their choice; they are making a decision to define who they are.

Some people have a problem with the use of the word awareness and prefer using the word acceptance. Some prefer to say self-determination over self-advocacy. These are all things to think about and consider.

I believe the best advocates are people who keep the conversation moving forward, focusing on the abilities of all people and leaving disability behind. All people have strengths and all people have weaknesses.

Nobody likes to focus on their weaknesses. Good advocates keep their focus on ability, strengths, and the fact that all people are just that, people.

“It means people on crutches and in a wheelchair can do anything.”

— Hannah McFadden at the dedication of a statue showing President Franklin Roosevelt in the wheelchair he designed for himself
Carrie Griffith’s phone is constantly getting texts. All the time.

“I've gotten pictures of people trimming hedges, exercising at the park, jet skiing at the Lake, having fun at festivals, going to music concerts, carving pumpkins, going on vacations, volunteering and celebrating birthdays,” says Griffith, Community Living (CL) Program Manager.

Her popularity these days is prompted by a project she started called the “Year in Review.” Now Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) in her houses can't wait to send her pictures of what individuals they support are doing.

A year ago, Griffith sat reminiscing with one of the individuals in the Community Living Program. The individual was looking through a few old pictures in a box. Griffith was struck by a few observations.

First, the individual didn’t have any photo albums. Second, she had very few pictures of herself as an adult. And thirdly, most of her memories were of people she didn’t have photos of.

“We do an excellent job making sure the people we support are taken care of. We assist with meds, meals, and work. Things that help people be independent. But I wanted us to look at the quality of lives. Are people happy? Are they having fun?”

So Griffith challenged her team to get beyond the initial day to day knowledge of supporting people. Are individuals repeating the same routine day in and day out? Are they doing things that interest them?

Griffith compiles them into albums at the end of the year. Each house receives this gift called “The Year in Review”.

She wanted them to find out what each person enjoys and do it. Then, document it with photos.

At year’s end many of us reflect on what we did, who we spent time with, and what we might like to do during the upcoming year. It’s no different in the Community Living Program; only now they have the Year in Review to help.

“The book is the first thing the ladies I work with grab to show visitors, friends, family, or support members of an IP,” says CL Program Supervisor Vicki Schulte.

“Out book is filled with many firsts. First fishing trip, first hotel stay... And the individuals are over the age of 30. This changes the perspective of these experiences.”

Not only does this book help the team connect with individuals, it makes the job more fun. Direct Support Professionals (DSP’s) are encouraged to spend time investigating interesting hobbies or events to share with others.

“I am very proud of what people have come up with and what they have done so far- it really is a positive project that feeds on its own energy,” Griffith says.

In fact, at the end of the year, as the books were passed out to supervisors, they would look through and say “Oh!
What a neat idea! I bet my house would love to do that!

The albums have inspired individuals to advocate for themselves, too. They want their books loaded with fun memories, something they can show off to friends, family, and staff. They’re more vocal about what they want from life and new things they might like to try.

“For the initial Year in Review, the individuals needed a little guidance; this year it is fun to sit back and watch them do the planning,” Schulte says. “First event of the year for 2014 is a train ride to a big city. And this is only the beginning!”

Griffith explains, “These books are becoming a symbol of what our team does and that the focus should always be about the individuals we support—helping them to seize opportunities to have great, exciting lives. It’s not about existing, but about living.”

This will be a yearly tradition for Griffith’s team. “It’s important that this is an ongoing project,” says Griffith. “That as the years progress, the houses will have libraries of each year and a way to reflect on the people and the events that were important to them.”

“There’s nothing better than seeing a smiling face on my phone and knowing that staff are doing a great job and individuals are happy,” Griffith continues. “You can’t beat a text like that!”

April is National Autism Awareness Month

April 2nd
- 7th annual Autism Awareness Day
- Light It Up Blue event - Columns by Jesse Hall on MU Campus at 4:30pm

April 3rd
- Youth Mental Health First Aid Course 8a-5p at Boone Electric Community Room

April 5th
- Bowling for Autism Fundraiser at AMF Town and Country Lanes

April 9th
- The Autism Rally at the Capitol

April 23rd
- Administrative Professionals Day

April 24th
- Statewide Asset Development Summit in Jefferson City, Missouri

April 26th
- 4th Annual Mid-MO Walk for Autism at Bethel Park

May 3rd
- The Grove Dedication Ceremony from 1-3pm

“Let the shameful walls of exclusion finally come tumbling down.”

— Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), signed by former President George H.W. Bush
David Continues to Succeed Working at Gerbes

Seven months ago David took a big step in his life. He left his job at ACT Works (AW) to begin work at Gerbes as a part-time grocery clerk.

It didn’t take long before David’s hard work, personable demeanor, and great customer service skills were noticed. He was approached by the Grocery Department Manager, Ken Bower, about transferring to the Customer Service Department. David gladly accepted the new part-time courtesy clerk position.

David quickly established a positive relationship with his supervisor Crystal Lang, Customer Service Manager. “David is amazing, and he’s progressing very well,” Lang said. “Even when I am having a bad day, he somehow knows how to cheer me. He can never move away!”

Employees at Gerbes cannot say enough about David and his work ethic. He is described as a great employee by all—a real asset to the Gerbes team.

David provides excellent customer service and accurately completes every task asked of him, independently and in a timely manner. He continues to be very successful at Gerbes due to his motivation and perseverance to achieve his employment goals.

David too is pleased with his position and work environment. “I love my job! I appreciate the opportunity to be employed at Gerbes,” he says.

There is no doubt David has left a void at AW. “He was the jack of all trades,” states Davin Tipton, ACT Works Program Supervisor. From running the grinder in the warehouse to handling the outgoing shipments, David was their man.

Since David was quite comfortable in that role of the “go-to guy,” he had to be convinced that he was ready for community employment. Tipton states, “but when he got into the job development process with ACT Career Services, he was all in!”

Of course, this success could not be possible without the great support of Gerbes and the management team there. “I applaud management and the other employees at the Gerbes on Nifong for their assistance, encouragement, dedication, and willingness to think employment first,” ACT Career Services Program Supervisor Fontella Jackmon-Jones states.

We commend David for taking this big step into community employment. We’re excited about what he’s already accomplished and what is yet to come.

“A hero is an ordinary individual who finds strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.”

— Christopher Reeve
Kristin Cummins, Community Integration’s New Activities Coordinator

Kristin Cummins began as Community Integration’s Activities Coordinator in February. This is her first job since finishing her Master’s degree.

Cummins moved to Columbia in the eighth grade. She likes it so much she keeps coming back.

She attended college at Lindenwood University in St. Charles. A mission trip to Mississippi to help rebuild homes damaged by Hurricane Katrina helped her settle on a career goal, after changing her mind several times. She chose Social Work.

“I knew I wanted to help people, but I didn’t know how,” Cummins states. This trip sealed the deal.

After graduating from Lindenwood she moved back to Columbia to work on her Master’s degree in Social Work, with an emphasis in Policy Planning and Administration.

Just before getting her second degree, her boyfriend proposed. They married that Fall.

She also got the chance to fulfill her dream of working with The Old North St. Louis Restoration Group. She worked as an intern there for a semester and then moved back to Columbia to begin her job hunt.

It didn’t take her long to find a great start to her career. Not long after she applied at ACT she was offered the position of Activities Coordinator.

“I am ready to get my feet wet with a job that utilizes my degree,” Cummins says. “This job is perfect because I get to be creative and have fun as well.”

We are glad that Cummins chose the path she chose. Her hard work and passion for helping others will serve her well at ACT.

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.”

— Helen Keller
GET CONNECTED
Come follow us on social media:

http://www.actservices.org
ACTofCoMo
ACTofCoMo

CONTACT US
ACT
2200 Burlington
Columbia, MO 65202
1-800-359-4607
1-573-474-9446