

Sheltered Workshop Reflections as of 5/12/15

NOTE: This was written before I learned that there is NO SUCH THING as a subminimum wage. That term has been made up by the National Disability Network to disparage the WORK performed by those who can ONLY WORK FOR the SPECIAL WAGE as allowed by LAW!

Before we present the gifts of the “Sheltered Workshop”* let us take a step back and look at the big picture. What we see are many forms of disability various forms of physical disability to a continuum of brain impairments from little or no brain impairment to severe brain impairment.

Out of all of the disabilities, it seems to me, using the range of brain function, individuals with little or no impairment as one group, a second group would be individuals with mild to moderate brain impairment and the third group would be individuals with severe brain impairments is at least one way of seeing the big picture.

While the individuals in these three groups all have disabilities their NEEDS ARE significantly different. Besides brain impairments a second factor that can be a major contributing factor across all individuals with disabilities is behavior. While behavior is not a disability in and of itself, it can be a complicating factor in the employment of a disabled individual and in their life in general.

Beside these two area there is obviously those who are physically challenged and they can be seen on basically the same scale as brain impairment is individuals with little or no impairment as one group, a second group would be individuals with mild to moderate physical challenges and the third group would be individuals with severe physical challenges.

While the ability to “work” is significantly different in the three groups, the individuals in each of these very broad groups must, do work that is meaningful to them. Whether it is just a smile or it is working for General Motors the work will be meaningful to the person doing it.

As we all know each person with a disability (or their guardian) has the **right to choose** and pick where they “work” and where they live. This is a fundamental foundation stone of the American Disability Act (ADA). While the **right of each person to choose** is important it is **EQUALLY IMPORTANT that a variety of work experiences be available** that address the varied needs of all of those individuals who are disabled. “Sheltered Workshops” MUST BE AVAILABLE to those whose disability(ies), mind impairment, physical challenge and behavior, limits them to the more protected work environment of a “Sheltered Workshop” or even a day facility.

I am hoping that three companion pieces will be written, Gifts of Community (Public**) Work, and Gifts of Day Service Programs and the Gifts of the Centers that the State of Wisconsin operates. These should be written by others, who know those worlds much better than I do. I know of the benefits of a “Sheltered Workshop” because our daughter Rosa has been working at VIP Service, a “Sheltered Workshop” for twelve years.

The primary individual using the “Sheltered Workshop” would be those individuals in the second group, individuals with mild to moderate brain impairment. Of course as mentioned, there are surely exceptions based on behavior and other issues.

Gifts of the Sheltered Workshop (Please note: this is a draft.)

First: and foremost that the “Sheltered Workshop” exist!! Without its existence NONE of the rest of the Gifts - Benefits WILL EVER BE REALIZED by the tens of thousands that realize some of all of the Gifts every day!!!

Second: there is **WORK** to do. While WORK is a human experience and there is much written about WORK by others we know that WORK is fulfilling from our own experiences. Rosa has said that about the WORK that she has done at VIP. While a production rate may seem important the single issue is accuracy, for WORK to be of economic value. Is the product that is being completed done exactly the way that it needs to be done? That is a challenge and in some cases a major challenge to providing work to those who are disabled.

Third: The “**Sub-minimum Wage**”*** is the **KEY** that allows “Sheltered Workshops” to work, to exist. New terms such as prorated wages or commensurate wages are starting to be used instead of “sub-minimum wage”, but it is the CONCEPT and not the name that is critical to the existence of “Sheltered Workshops”. The logic for the “sub-minimum wage” is simple and clear if Rosa produced half what a full time worker would produce then she will receive half of the financial benefit for doing that specific job. It may need to be audited from time to time BUT THERE IS NOTHING THE MATTER WITH the concept. If we want significant meaningful WORK for people who have mild to moderate brain impairments and or physical impairments then we MUST HAVE THE “sub-minimum wage”. **If the “sub-minimum wage” is ELIMINATED** Rosa and tens of thousands of others whose disabilities limit their ability to work WILL HAVE NO WORK AT ALL.

Fourth: The **VARIETY of JOBS** that an individual can experience. We have only recently realized the importance of this. Rosa has learned over 100 jobs in the twelve years that she has worked at VIP. Each of those jobs required her to trust Pam, to listen to Pam, to comprehend Pam and, and when necessary ask Pam how to do something. Rosa is still working on asking for help. The VARIETY of job experiences has allowed her to grow to become more independent.

Again it needs to be noted that while some individuals may be able to do a two or three step assembly job, they cannot collate a ten page letter. Some may be able to put labels on a bottle straight while others cannot. This variety of JOBS is very, very important to the growth and health of all those who work at a “Sheltered Workshop”.

Fifth: Besides the variety of job there is the **speed of the work**. It makes no difference if the assembly job take a minute or ten minutes. To know that what you are doing and the speed that you are doing it, is OK, is very important. It is one of those things that one might not see as a Gift but surely it is.

Sixth: Stability of the “Sheltered Workshop”. The schedule is the same. The workers are the same. There is a place to go to WORK and be with FRIENDS. There is a stability of workers and supervisors. For Rosa and we assume many others KNOWING what tomorrow will bring is VERY, VERY important in her life and in their lives as well. She “implodes” emotionally when the “activities” (as she

calls them) of the day are not known. When Rosa initially came to our home these periods of inability to function could last days.

For Parents and Guardians KNOWING that the “Sheltered Workshop” WILL BE THERE WHEN THEY are NO LONGER CAPABLE OF caring for their loved one is of even GREATER IMPORTANCE! To know that the Social Contract to take care of a son or daughter who is disabled WILL BE HONORED by the community of the next generation.

Seventh: Family For some/many individuals with disabilities their personal living situation can be disrupted by a change of ownership of the facility that they call home. Yes some will have stable homes but others will have no control over their “home”. The “home” can be too expensive or it can be too big or not big enough and of course it can close. When an individual is forced to change households they lose that “family” and so the stability of the people at a sheltered workshop becomes their family. As I was preparing this I realized that **Rosa will grieve our deaths with her sheltered workshop family.**

Eighth: Safety. Both physical and personal safety are a priority at “Sheltered Workshops”. This extra caution is reassuring to both the workers and their parents and/or their guardians.

Ninth: Friends/Community. Before we think about friends at a “Sheltered Workshop,” let us think of the nature of our own friends. Much has been written on friendship and from that we know our friends tend to have similar interest and to have comparable abilities to ourselves and so it is with people who work at “Sheltered Workshops”. They have friends amongst the other workers, and with the supervisors as well. It is these supervisors that some call “PAID STAFF” that seem to bother some in the broader disability community but it is knowing that “friends” outside of the common boundaries are friendships of a special nature.

What is special about the “Sheltered Workshop” is that with time true friendships do develop, with both the other workers as well as the “PAID STAFF” where they know each other to the extent that they CAN KNOW and BE KNOWN. They talk about the events in each other’s lives, they talk about their family members and their pets. They talk about sports they talk about the weather. They talk with their supervisors who are able to share with them their lives at a level that they can know.

“Sheltered Workshops” are, a Community of workers all doing their work for the good of themselves and their fellow workers. It takes time to be able to know an individual well enough to get a smile if that is all they have to give, to “you can do better and you know it” which will help someone who needs a little extra encouragement. Yes all of this is part of the Community that will be lost if “Sheltered Workshops” are CLOSED.

Immediately after high school Rosa began to work 3 days a week and by Christmas time 5 days a week. Even though she was working we realized that Rosa (then 21) needed to get out of the house without us. We then realized that for the amount of time that was needed, 3 to 5 hours weekly, we would have to pay someone to do that for us. So we found a young woman Cathy who became Rosa’s “Friend”. SHE WAS in essence **PAID STAFF** who took Rosa out to eat and to malls etc.

As we **PAID** Cathy it became clear to us WHY Cathy needed to be paid. Cathy’s identity with Rosa was a JOB, NOT part of Cathy’s peer group, not part of her learning and development community. Paying Cathy allowed her to be with Rosa as a “Friend” which then turned into a friendship.

Twelve years ago Rosa also bonded with Pam a **PAID STAFF** member at VIP Services. Rosa has shared with Pam the births of her girls, hearing the baby stories, and now watching the girls show their goats at the County Fair. Yes there is love and care and..... It is despicable to use the term **PAID STAFF** in derogatory manner that some disability rights individuals do. They imply that because it is a paid staff person there is not real bond.

What is CRITICAL TO UNDERSTAND HERE is that our personal individual associations are part of what defines us as INDIVIDUAL HUMAN BEINGS. These relationships, in large part, will be with OTHERS much like ourselves. These relationships are our very essence. There must be an ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THIS MOST BASIC HUMAN FACT.

Tenth: An integral part of “Sheltered Workshops” is **transportation**. Yes. A few workers may be able to drive but the vast majority of workers at “Sheltered Workshops” need a ride to work. In those cities with bus service and a “Sheltered Workshop” on the bus line, a few more individuals would be able to catch the bus to get to work but there still are a significant number of others who without affordable transportation being provided will NOT BE ABLE TO WORK.

Eleventh: The **Staff** Yes the staff of the Sheltered Workshop is a gift. Some despairingly call them **PAID STAFF** but they are a group of highly trained individuals giving of themselves in many ways that are not easy for many of use to deal with on a daily basis. And to imply that these tens of thousands of staff can be replaced in the for-profit workforce now being called “community integrated employment” is beyond absurd.

Twelfth: “Sheltered Workshops” allow extended vacation allowing parents who are retired to take longer vacations without endangering their son or daughters job when they return. Will Walmart allow a 6 week vacation?

Thirteenth: “Sheltered Workshops” are also a backup for a person who is having a hard time at their Public employment place of work. It may be for a few weeks or it may be a permanent change but it is critical that it be there. The alternative to not being successful at Public Employment Work **CAN NOT BE SITTING AT HOME WATCHING TV!!**

*We will use quotes about “Sheltered Workshop” indicating that it is the concept that we are talking about. In the past “Sheltered Workshop” was accepted as very good description of a safe place for people with disabilities to work. As we know today it clearly is used by some in a derogatory manner, as in “You work at a Sheltered Workshop, and not in the community”!! “Poor you!”

**We use public work instead of community. The word Community has a warm feeling to it but the reality is that being in the public is seldom being in community. Sitting in a public space observing and being observed and sometimes being acknowledged is not being in a community.

***We will use quotes about “Sub-Minimum Wage” indicating that it is the CONCEPT that we are talking about not a definition that in the past was accepted as a useful description but now is used in a derogatory and degrading manner. The correct term is a Special Wage

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