

# I Believe That...

*By Ingemar Johansson*

I believe that the premise for our work as human services professionals is that prosperity in our society ought to be measured not by the quality of life of the well-to-do but by the quality of life of the less fortunate.

This past October, at the Gerald Ford Museum in Grand Rapids, I joined 83 other individuals representing 32 different countries when being sworn in as US citizens and, as one could see in the faces of those that were there, this country is very much the place to be. The joy in our faces was profound. Although I have lived in this country for 30 years I, along with the others, finally joined the American Club as full members. This event affirmed my belief that the door to the American Dream must be kept open for all. For the strong and for the not-so-strong, for the healthy and the not-so-healthy, for the prosperous and the not-so-prosperous, and that we unite around this pursuit by being there for each other as fellow Americans.

I believe that the common denominator for all people is not our ability or disability that we live with, but rather the humanity in us all. We are all the same at the core and we all live as neighbors in this land and have the privilege to pursue our dreams and aspirations limited only by our own imagination.

I believe that we need to let our imagination flow freely. As human services professionals we need to consistently renew ourselves to adapt to the changing world in which we live. As service providers, we have an obligation to attempt to be on the cutting edge of our industry. Although many of us have stretched our imagination, have been innovative and the ones to, in a variety of ways, assist in improving the lives of people with disabilities, our efforts are never enough. Despite the progress we have made, I believe that we must never rest on our laurels but always renew the way we do business, to step out of our comfort zone and to challenge ourselves to do the next best thing, because there is always a better way.

So what's a better way? We may differ in our opinions, that is par for the course, but I have been clear in my own beliefs and I have openly challenged our system to keep pushing for the next best thing. I have been clear that, in my opinion, people with disabilities must have the opportunity to pursue a life of community inclusion in *every* aspect of life thus be able to pursue the American Dream.

- Not be held back because our provider system requires people to fill the facilities that have been built to accommodate.

- Not be held back because the foster care homes in which people reside don't have the staff to provide adequate support and residents, therefore, need to attend the day program that leads to nowhere.
- Not be held back because "there is nothing to do in our community" although the rest of us live and breathe community life.
- Not be held back because we, as operators of work facilities or day programs, need to fill production quotas or service slots and therefore limit the access to other opportunities in the community.
- Not be held back because in times of slim job opportunities "it is not our job to be volunteer coaches" or that "the funding source doesn't allow for assistance beyond jobs brokering."
- Not be held back because "we get paid to keep people busy every day between 9 and 3."
- Not be held back because of the bucket system in which a hodgepodge of funding regulations puts up barriers requiring unending professional navigation.

By no means do I suggest that we have based our system on holding individuals back. On the contrary, there are many creative friends and colleagues pursuing innovative projects and there are many organizations that provide good income for people.

I do, however, suggest that these arguments, with their obvious consequences, are commonplace within our system of care and that we need to continue to push the envelope to find better ways because it is the right thing to do.

I may insist that "my" part is to do this or that in this big picture, that "our" organization is limited in its scope and we will stick to what we do best, be it running a work program, a day program, or another niche of some sort. But we all need to realize that in these challenging times with shrinking resources, we absolutely need to find ways to collaborate with one another in new and creative ways. Collaborate with our funders, with our community partners, with our constituents, and with the community at large and ensure that we utilize the resources wisely with the greatest possible outcomes.

That means that we need to think outside the box, rethink what our obligations are, rethink what our role *could* be, rethink our place in the community network and assert ourselves as leaders in our communities to create the next best way.

I believe we are in an opportune moment in time for such change when a foundation have been laid with recent convergence of influences:

- Firstly, the Recovery movement for people with mental illness calling for assistance beyond the traditional clinical treatment on which most mental health systems are based with employment, community inclusion, relationships and living arrangements...
- Secondly, the Self Determination movement where the power of the purse is shifting to the consumer...
- Thirdly, the opportunities available via Medicaid waivers that are modeled across the country calling for community inclusion in no uncertain terms.

...Opportunity knocks.

I believe that every person should have a decent place to live and choose where and with whom.

I believe that every person should have the opportunity to make income, be it with a job or a business venture no matter how small but *a/ways* with an eye to inclusion with other community members.

I believe that every person should have the opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of his/her neighbors and give back by means of volunteering for others.

I believe that every person should have easy access to community resources for play and spiritual aspirations.

I believe that every person should have the opportunity to make lasting meaningful social relationships.

I believe we should simply do our part in assisting people to live by these basic American values.

As proud public servants it is our responsibility to, rather than segregating our constituents in buildings and programs, actively engage ourselves in creating a welcoming community for people with disabilities. We have an important role to create opportunities, not only for those that we serve, but also for the community at large. Therefore, we need to think outside the box, recognize opportunities that are put before us and utilize our power to promote community inclusion for those that we serve and make our constituency a vital part of our neighborhoods. That is the American Way.

With a staggering number of unemployed persons with disabilities, 70% have been suggested, and a poor outlook for improvement, why not customize supports and invest our time and resources in assisting individuals to start their own micro business venture? To pursue micro enterprises that are likely

to generate income, however small, and that give people a reason to get up in the morning. I have seen the benefits first hand.

In light of this sobering unemployment number, along with economic turmoil with consequent human and societal setbacks, let us recognize that people with disabilities is one of the greatest chronic un-tapped human resources in our society. Why not take on the role of brokering this human resource, recruit people with disabilities, and form a volunteer-based Community Action system which purpose it is to assist others in a time of great need?

I have seen the benefits of this kind of community inclusion. Everybody wins, the volunteer, the recipient of the help, the community at large, and the taxpayer. What better way to offer assistance to those that need it? What better way to include people with disabilities as a resource in hard times? What better way to break down the prevailing stigma that members of our community carry towards people with disabilities? Why not train people with disabilities that so desire to become such a force of goodwill as volunteers where there is no paid work to be had? To ensure that people with disabilities be part of the solution and that our public resources be put to good use for the benefit of all.

I also believe that we need to listen well to those we serve, to actively engage to keep evolving our human service system by pushing for the implementation of self-determination. This system enables people to have the power of purchasing their own personal assistants for the many facets of their lives. It gives great opportunities for the people that we serve but also for a customer oriented service system. The resource pie will be cut differently and...opportunity knocks.

At the end of the day, the purpose of our service system is to enable people with disabilities to prosper, to lead meaningful lives and to pursue happiness as full citizens in a welcoming community along with the rest of us. This, I believe, is our responsibility and simply the right thing to do. And, as I read in the eyes of my 83 new American fellow citizens at the Jerry Ford Museum last month, it is by all means the American Dream.

*Ingemar Johansson, Chief Operating Officer for the Manistee-Benzie Community Mental Health, received the esteemed **Award of Excellence** from the Michigan Rehabilitation Conference in November 2008. "I Believe That..." is his thank you and acceptance speech. Ingemar is a founder and active member of Michigan Partners for Freedom.*