

WHAT MATTERS?

Freedom

Donna B. and Donna R. have known each other for 31 years. Born 54 years ago with cerebral palsy, Donna B. has attended the same day program in rural Charles County since she was a young adult. For almost as long, Donna R. has been executive director of the agency, which in recent years has changed, supporting people in the community instead of only at the day program inside the center.

Donna R. explains that figuring out how to enact that change has required some creative thinking by her and her staff, as well as courage from the people that have been supported by the agency a long time. As she points out, “Sometimes the community is not so friendly when they see people with significant disabilities.”

But despite some initial fears, Donna B. wanted to try spending her days out in the world, rather than only at the center. “I didn’t know if I would like it,” she says, “but I wanted to try.”

There have been challenges. People have sometimes stared at her. Prospective employers made quick assumptions about Donna’s limitations, both real and perceived. She tried to work at an animal shelter, but its doors were too narrow for her wheelchair. Later, she landed a volunteer position two days a week at a residential rehab center, but had to go all the way home for bathroom breaks because its bathroom was inaccessible to her. Noting Donna’s dedication – and after giving the situation some thought – the facility eventually agreed to allow her to keep a hooyer lift in its bathroom so she could work all day without interruption.

Donna accesses her job with the help of her support person, Tonya, but she doesn’t need any help to connect with her patients. “We talk,” she notes. “They enjoy my company and often tell me they don’t have any family. I am their only visitor for the day. I love helping people



Donna is looking at a painting of a jack-o-lantern a child is sharing with her.

who seem to need more help than I do.”

Donna still takes advantage of resources at the agency’s center, such as music therapy, art classes, and exercising with the quadriciser. But she also goes out into the community every day – shopping, applying for jobs, using the computer at the local library. She is happy about the blending of both worlds, discovering new ways to grow. She taught herself to paint using a headset, and now teaches children at the local childcare center to paint the same way.

Asked if the change has been worth the challenges, Donna is emphatic. “Yes! I’m an outside person. I love having no walls around me and feeling free. It’s not what I do every week, it’s the journey.”

Adds Donna R., “It’s not about perfection. It’s about making her life the same as anybody else’s. Each year we see progress. Donna hopes to be paid for the job she does. Next year, we may see that happen.”

Donna R. and Donna B. agree: “We want acceptance and blending into the community where it’s natural. We aren’t just hanging out; we’re building relationships.”

What matters? That our days be spent with purpose. Services are changing to help people with disabilities lead the lives they want. Ensuring they have opportunities to work and spend their days in other meaningful ways, alongside people without disabilities, is one of the ways change is happening. Learn more at: www.md-council.org