Building the Road of Self-advocacy Summer Institute 2007 Building Communication Through the Arts

By

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Building the Road of Self-advocacy

I am Tracy Thresher and I am here today to type about dearly rewarding work as a self-advocate. First I want to share my thoughts on using Facilitated Communication (FC) and having a voice. I have been using FC since 1990 and was one of the first people in Vermont to be introduced to it. Not being able to express myself was like being in a world of silence.

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I couldn't tell people what I liked and didn't like. People thought I was retarded, that I didn't understand what was being said to me. It was frustrating and made me angry and I withdrew. The experience of the world looks different from my experience. Most people take their ability to talk for granted and I take my inability to talk quite seriously. I live with it everyday – it is always there each time someone wants to read my thoughts.

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The impact of learning to speak up and have a voice has been quite meaningful for me. I have typed life goals and dreams that have actually come true. One dream of mine was to go to church and be baptized. I told my mother this and it happened. I have been able to meet with my pastor and discuss God and the Bible because religion is very important to me.

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I am learning to do the things I want to… teaching others about Autism and FC and movement differences. These are things I've wanted to do and now it's happening! I have spoken about these things I wanted for my life and some have come true. This would never have happened without FC and speaking out for myself.

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I have been appointed by the Governor to the Vermont State Standing Committee on Developmental Disabilities. This is a very important appointment because I am the only autistic person that uses FC to communicate on the committee. I must show how open minds are the ticket to learning how to support proper quality of life initiatives.

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I think sitting on committees and other structures that plan for and make decisions about the lives of people with disabilities is extremely important - with so much at stake we need to voice our opinions front and center so that typing is seen as valuable input. Yes, I want you all to know speaking up and speaking out are as American as apple pie and hot dogs.

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It is every Americans god given right to speak ones thoughts, views, and lost world ways. The war in Iraq is not proper use of Americas' troops, resources, or political capital. This is also true of autism the current wars on autism are deeply misled and a strong voice is needed from people with autism. Without that voice the fear will guide the way autism is treated.

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That is more to do with people's misunderstanding of what autism is and I think people have loads of professional awful information. We are not a diagnosis or a label we are people with feelings, likes, and dislikes very much like everyone else. The way to think about this is, each person is an individual with there own uniqueness, so don't think autism think out who the person is.

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This is my message to all of you - speak your true inner voice - let people know what trusting intelligent and articulate open-minded people we are and that we have something to offer. And the way to get heard is to find trustworthy partners and with them you can fully express yourself.

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So much of my time is spent in silence listening to others stories and lack of speech traps me in with raging thoughts. Learning to speak out first and foremost is done with a desire to change the world and my voice may not sound like others but the desire is 100 and 10 percent there waiting to fire things up.

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Why to me is self-advocacy important? That is my life-line to working real thoughts through typing and the outside world. The thoughts are there waiting to come out and hope for better life pushes the words out. The Breaking the Barriers project is one good example of speaking out and being heard.

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With training and support from Christi Kasha Hendrickson, Denise Marshall, and Jamie does double time talker Ruppmann we were able to spend time advocating for the right to communicate in Washington DC and state representatives listened to Larry Bissonnette, Darlene Hanson, Marilyn Chadwick, Tyler Fihe, Meyer Shevin, Sue Rubin, Harvey Lavoy, Pascal Cheng, Jamie Burke, Sheree Burke and me.

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My advice to you is to get support from a knowledgeable Communication Partner and get out into the world so you can make connections and learn how to speak your voice. Leading the way is our responsibility and our right to have a voice. While typing this I am thinking my life sucks due to so little say I have at times and that people speak for me.

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But here I am typing real thoughts about things that are very important to us. All I wish is that we didn't have to deal with so much ignorance; really I do, but so be it and onward soldiers and let's change how people view disability. Righteous indignation is up to us, so I say speak out let people know what you are thinking for silence is deadly and speech is golden.

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I am not controlling the way people think, seriously folks, what I am trying to do is speak to your consciousness and just thinking. So out spoken Tracy is saying - think with your hearts and minds to cast out the doubters making our message clear.

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Want you all to think about what you do when you leave here. Big time call to action folks, step up and speak out doing what you think you can't is important. Yes, I can't take credit for that it was Eleanor Roosevelt who said;

"you must do the things you think you can not."

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