

American Dreaming: Introduction

May, 1999



American Dreaming is a series of publications with a common theme. Some publications are one person's story, others focus on a topic, and still others present a method for speaking about and acting on dreams. All focus on what it takes to keep the American Dream alive in the face of resistance and exclusion.

The information in these publications comes from a series of conversations I had during 1998 with individuals who have disabilities and parents of individuals who have disabilities in many parts of Ohio. They told me their stories of struggle and survival, energy and exhaustion. I learned from them about what it takes to live the American Dream, once a label of "developmental disability" comes into play. I tape recorded the conversations and wrote down people's words from the tapes. I am very grateful to the people who gave their time and opened their lives to me, so that others can gain ideas and hope.

The people who agreed to talk with me spoke of freedom and opportunity, ownership and access, rights and citizenship, about going to school, belonging, getting married, living in a house, and being valued as human beings.

I heard from them that the chance to live the American Dream is tentative for many and nonexistent for some. I saw early in the conversations that trying to live this dream takes a great deal of energy. People who were connected to information and support were often the ones who could sustain the dream over the long haul.

People face barriers related to the tendencies in our society to discount them from the beginning. Because of this, tremendous sustained energy is required to break into a life of opportunity and freedom. People maintain and increase their energy by:

- gaining access to information,
- hearing the voices of others who have remained hopeful,
- receiving adequate medical care and family support, and
- connecting with others who help them solve difficult problems and resolve unanswered questions.

Many of the people I talked with influence their status in the community by creating opportunities to belong and learn. Creating these opportunities is not easy. Individuals must "make room" within settings for these opportunities to occur.

It makes a difference when families and individuals connect to sources of information and support that help them maintain their dream and the necessary energy it takes to find their way into the community. Sources of information and support appear to be most effective when they are ongoing and grounded in the beliefs that everyone is worthy of a life in the community.

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Many individuals I spoke with clearly view their experiences as a civil rights struggle. They decided early on that the problem was not that they or their child was less worthy than others, but that social injustice was at work. They identify many structures of oppression that have worked to keep them out of the heart of the community and the opportunities it offers. Many have spent their lives trying to break through such structures.

Understanding oppressive structures doesn't make their work easy. What it does mean is that people know what they are up against, and they become more confident and more determined as they go about advocating for valued lives.

Public schools and agencies charged with supporting individuals with developmental disabilities have an essential role in promoting opportunity, belonging and status – in a word, citizenship. The movement toward individuals with disabilities taking their rightful place in their communities is a concept of civil rights.

The ideas and experiences people shared with me raise as many questions as they answer. For example,

- How do opportunity, belonging and status relate to each other?
- What do experiences of other minority groups tell us about advancing the rights of individuals with developmental disabilities?
- How does the language we use and hear affect our ability to imagine possible futures?
- How does our language affect the ways the larger community understands individuals with developmental disabilities?
- What accounts for the dramatic differences between families that maintain their dreams and those who settle for reduced quality?

Each article ends with a question designed to keep the conversation going. I invite you to ask these questions of yourself and of others, beginning (or continuing) a dialogue that will produce new ideas and increase hope. As you draw more and more people into this dialogue, you will be creating new opportunities, which are the foundation of ***American Dreaming***.

– Candee Basford

What are the most pressing questions for me right now?

What barriers do I face that keep me from feeling hopeful?

What sources of information and support help me keep moving ahead?

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