

***American Dreaming:* Jim Soloway**

April, 1999



Jim Soloway,
of Springfield,
in his home

Stories have more room in them than ideas: It is as if ideas are made of blocks, rigid and hard, and stories are made of gauze that is elastic. You can see through it, so that what is beyond is tantalizing. You can't quite make it out; and because the imagination is always moving forward, you yourself are constantly stretching. Stories are the way the spirit is exercised.

Alice Walker,
By the Light of My Father's Smile

“Constantly stretching”

“He constantly foreshadows what the future might bring.”

“A few years ahead of the curve.”

“A trendsetter.”

Jim Soloway's story gives some appreciation of why so many people, in separate conversations, use such similar words and phrases to describe him. His story has “lots of room in it” – much more room than many of the usual ideas we carry around about who people are and what they should settle for in life.

This is much more than a story about Jim's life. It is a story about our times and culture – our ways of separating and expecting less of people we see as different.

“Ideas are made of blocks, rigid and hard”

Jim was born to a mother who was overwhelmed by his unbounded energy and her own poverty. Our history of that time included some “rigid and hard” responses to situations like Jim’s. He was placed in a large state-run institution, away from family and community.

Even in this impersonal and uninspiring place, Jim did everything he could to make his days interesting. He filled his days scavenging for materials to build his many projects and inventions. Those who knew him then remember him for his dedication to go his own way. This was the first evidence of Jim’s commitment to be himself, regardless of the “rigid and hard” ideas about who he was and what his limits were.

“Stories are made of gauze that is elastic”

As Jim was growing up in an institution, the political and social environment in Ohio and the rest of the country was shifting. Institutions were slowly giving way to smaller living arrangements. Jim moved out in 1979, at the age of seventeen. With nine others, he moved to nearby South Vienna into one of the area’s first group homes.

Many predicted disaster. Some were convinced that people like Jim should be kept away from the rest of us, either because it wouldn’t be safe for Jim or because people like Jim would make our communities unsafe.

*I hated paying rent
and wanted to own
my own home.*

Jim stretched the boundaries of what everyone thought was possible. He made friends. He got a job. He learned to cook and took immense pride in all his belongings.

“The imagination is always moving forward”

Jim came to find life in the group home much too confining. Before the service delivery system even had a name for it, Jim invented what some people today call “semi-independent living” or “supported living.” He transformed the carriage house behind the group home into an apartment where he could have time by himself, cook his own meals, and be more on his own.

Jim continued to try to fill his days with interesting activities. For a while he attended a local sheltered workshop. It wasn’t a match. Jim needed lots of lots of variety and stimulation in his days. He became clearer about being seen as a regular guy, not as someone different.

Jim was quick to see new possibilities. He found a job at a London car dealership. Since London was a rather long commute from his home, he began looking at apartments in London. He seemed to be constantly looking for something more, something better, always “moving forward.”

Times he spent with friends looking for a new place to live led to pivotal conversations about the difference between “for sale” and “for rent” - the difference between owning and renting. Once he understood the idea, Jim made it clear that he wanted to own a home, not rent. Jim’s friends and supporters agreed with Jim’s claim that home ownership was the way to go. They simply couldn’t figure out a way to make it happen. Jim reluctantly settled for a renting a house and signed a one-year lease.

Soon Jim became so disenchanted with renting that he created serious demonstrations of protest. He packed up all his possessions and piled them in a corner of the room. He slept on a crate, refusing even to sleep on the bed. He cut the electrical cord off his refrigerator, severing (literally) his connection with the place. He attempted, unsuccessfully, to avoid paying the utility bills. In Jim’s words,

“It was throwing money away. I hated paying rent and wanted to own my own home.”

“Exercising the spirit”

On February 25, 1999, Jim bought his own home. Some of his personal savings, combined with savings in his Supported Living account, provided the down payment. His benefits and income from work cover the monthly payments. He shares a back yard with one friend and lives down the street from another. He has plans to fix up the house, doing the work himself and with the help of friends. He and his friends plan to start a Neighborhood Association.

“I know what I like, and I know how I want my house to look. I get in a hurry sometimes, but my friends help me understand I need to save lots of money for the things I want. I can do a lot of things myself to fix my house.”

At the closing for the purchase of the house, the former owners presented Jim with a key chain engraved with his name on one side and the word “homeowner” on the other. Even in the brief time that they had known Jim, they were impressed by his enthusiasm for life and his enthusiasm for purchasing their home. They were clearly delighted to turn over their home to someone who would love it as they had.

“After I moved in, I had an open house. Lots of people came, and I got some gifts. This made me happy to show people my home. I love living alone, and I’m proud when someone asks me about my house.”

What might it mean to “exercise the spirit”? If *exercise* means “bring to bear, activate, put to use,” then the moral of Jim’s story might be this: ***Jim has put his spirit to use by showing us that it is often our imagination that limits what people can accomplish.*** His belief in himself led him to accomplish many things that others thought impossible. Jim has often been the inventor of new possibilities.

*I know what I like,
and I know how I want
my house to look.*

*I love living alone,
and I'm proud
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about my house.*

“What is beyond is tantalizing”

What is beyond for Jim? He has never been a man to rest on his laurels. There are pressures on him and those who support him to settle for a lesser life for him. Over the years Jim and those who love him have responded to these pressures by talking together about what his life can be and what it will take, over time, to make that happen. Jim and those closest to him clearly see a life of full participation in the community of Springfield, surrounded by those who care about him, working and volunteering to make his neighborhood and community a better place to live.

How Jim's story helps us move forward

What is beyond for others with disabilities, in Clark County and elsewhere? If Jim's story can be a guide, we have much to learn about our own ideas that hold people back from what they might accomplish. The story of Jim's life challenges all of us to exercise our spirit and imagination as we move beyond our limiting beliefs, into the world of possibility.

– Recorded by Jo Krippenstapel

What does my home mean to me?

How can I gain more control and ownership for myself or for my son or daughter over my (or their) home?

Who will support me as I do this?

American Dreaming is published by a Self-Determination Project: Removing the Mask and developed through a Grant from the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council. Contact us at: Removing the Mask, Ohio Association of County Boards of MR/DD, 73 East Wilson Bridge Road #B-1, Worthington, OH 43085. All opinions are those of Removing the Mask and do not necessarily reflect those of the Council.

