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**Abstract:**

John McKnight describes how the life of a man with disability, Charlie, was transformed from one of isolation to one embedded in his community. This transformation was facilitated in small steps and started with someone suggesting that Charlie be supported to attend a local club and helping to smooth his path. In the article the person suggesting Charlie's inclusion was someone in a work role but it could have been anyone who knew and cared about Charlie – including a family member or friend. It is an inspiring story that illustrates the potential of community connections when people with disability are encouraged to share their gifts and talents.

This article may be useful for anyone thinking through how someone they know could expand their roles and connections in their community.

**Keywords:** Advocacy, Attitudes, Community Development, Day activities, Inclusion, Friendship, Individualisation, Social activities.

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## COMMUNITIES THAT HELP PEOPLE

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John McKnight  
Director of Community Studies,  
Illinois*

### *Communities that Help People*

This is a story that takes place in a little town in Wisconsin called Spring Green. Spring Green has 1700 people. It's in dairy country. There are more cows in the country than there are people.

Is there a Canadian Legion Hall in your town? We have American Legions in the United States and there is a Hall in most towns.

Ferdie is the commander of Post 1147 of the American Legion in Spring Green. Ferdie is about 58 years old.

We have Independence Day on July 4. We always have a big parade and the American legion always leads off the parade. At the front of the parade there are three guys.

Ferdie is the guy in the middle, middle aged, potbelly, white shirt, blue jacker, carrying a flag. On either side are two other guys carrying guns that don't shoot.

Ferdie is also the cheese maker in town. Owns a little cheese factory. This is a story about Ferdie.

One day about six years ago a worker came to Spring Green and went to talk to a woman named Mary. When the worker got done talking to Mary, Mary got on the phone and called her brother Ferdie. As the worker drove out to the country where Ferdie makes the cheese, she was powerful beyond words because Mary had been running Ferdie's life since he was a baby.

When the worker got to the cheese factory to talk to Ferdie, he listened to the worker carefully because he knew that whatever happened here, Mary was going to hear about it tonight. Communities work by trust and obligation, not certification and money.



Communities work by trust and obligation, not certification and money



The worker said to Ferdie, "Do you remember Charles Symbles?" He said "I remember but I remember his mother better. She lived next door at one time."

"She died early, you remember that," the worker said. "When she

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died they sent her son Charlie to an institution. Now Charlie lives in a group home in the next town. But his home is here in Spring Green. I was wondering, Ferdie if Charlie could join you and go to the Legion Hall. He could do something there. He could also meet some people.” Ferdie was really taken aback. He said to the worker, “Well you know Charlie wasn’t in the big war and you had to be in it to be in the Legion.”

The worker was a person who knows about community. So she said to Ferdie, “But Ferdie, he is fifty four years old. He would have been in the war if he hadn’t been in the institution.”

Ferdie knew that was right. That pulled the rug out from under him. And he knows if he said no, Mary would come down on him. So he screwed up his courage and went to the Legion meeting that evening. When he got there the meeting was in full course. The cards were on the table, the beer bought. He sat down and after a while he said. “You fellas remember Charlie. Well, he is in a group home in the next town and I was wondering if it would be all right for him to come here some time.”

They were all sort of stunned. Charlie has been away for over forty years. Then somebody said, “Well Ferdie, he wasn’t in the big war.”

Ferdie reached for his trump card the worker had given him and said, “But Charlie would have been in

the war if he hadn’t been in the institution.” The guys thought about it. They decided to give it a try. So Ferdie brought Charlie in a few nights later to the Legion Hall. It wasn’t two weeks before Charlie had become the bartender. Charlie would stand there and guys would come over and get beer. You know how it is with bartenders, people tell them things. Now Charlie doesn’t talk, he just listens. So these guys would come and tell him their troubles. Charlie came to be closer to more men than even Father Gilbert.

When spring came they all went out to play baseball and Charlie went with them. In two weeks he had become the equipment manager.

One day in the spring Charlie was walking down the road by the feedmill. There was a flash storm. Ralph Olt had left the windows open. The flash storm brought water down the feed sacks. Ralph rushed outside to get somebody to help him get that feed out of there and there was Charlie. He and Charlie got all the sacks out to dry. Ralph was impressed. He then hired Charlie to work in the afternoons.

Ferdie bought a computer, put it in his office and turned the switch on. You know what? It did nothing. He was disappointed. But Charlie hung out a fair amount at the cheese factory and he turned it on and began to touch the keys. He began to spend hours in front of the

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thing. Ferdie realised that though Charlie doesn't talk, he does talk with the computer.

Ferdie told Mary who was the school principle; 'He is talking to that computer.' Mary drives twice a week to take continuing education courses. She said to Ferdie, "I can take Charlie over to extension, because they're giving computer courses." Mary began to drive him back and forth. Charlie learned a lot. And he began to show people in Spring Green how to use computers.

Out of this whole thing Mary became very fond of Charlie.

Mary's son, John went away to University. Her only son. So his room was vacant. She decided to invite Charlie to come live in the boy's room.

She called up the worker and said she wanted to see if Charlie could come and stay with her. But she was afraid. She didn't know about the money situation and she knew he needed some special medical care. The worker came and talked to her and said, "Don't worry Mary. We have it arranged so Charlie will get additional money from his job that will allow for his medication from Dr Thorn right here in town." So Charlie moved in.

So there he is. He has got real care, friends, he is involved in recreation, and he has a job. He has a special gift for those computers. He lives at home and has no worries.

But he has a great worker, a worker who understood how communities work. After she introduced Charlie to the people of Spring Green *she let go*, because she didn't have a service vision or an advocacy vision. She had a community vision.

Can you imagine a meeting where an Agency Director would say; "We got this fifty-four year old guy named Charlie. I want you to make him the best friend of fifty people, get him a job, put him on a ball team, make him a computer expert and find him a home." How many workers would it take to do that? There is a last part to the story.

Two years ago Charlie walked into Ferdie's office and found Ferdie dead. We were worried about what this meant to Charlie. It was June. On July 4, Independence Day, I was there to watch the parade. When the parade turned down Main Street, there were three people, two with guns and one in the middle with a flag. The one with the flag was Charlie.

And I knew what had happened to Charlie. I knew he was finally safe. No worker could ever keep Charlie from falling back into an institution, in that group home he would have grown old and gone back to an institution. But now he is safe. He's safe because Spring Green is not dependent on an agency. It is the place that surrounds Charlie.

The community is the only safe place for our folks. Community is a

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powerful place, sometimes a tough place, where people are vulnerable, people die, care and finally live out their lives as citizens. A sweet place where every Charlie needs to be.

From a presentation by J. McKnight.

*Editorial Response This excellent modern community development parable by John McKnight clearly illustrates how community exists in the lives of people with disabilities when-*

- 1. People truly believe in the capacity of community to welcome people with disabilities, and to become stronger through the sharing of their gifts, talents and contribution.*
- 2. People with disabilities believe themselves that they have the capacity to be of community.*
- 3. That the human service system “let go” of people with disabilities so that community can truly be found.*

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