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**Abstract**

The author describes her attempts to facilitate friendships between her son and other young people during the summer when he comes to stay with his brother and sister. She compares how easily the other two young children form networks during this period. One summer the author prepared for the forthcoming visit by using strategies to get friendships in place. **Keyword: Friendship**

# Connecting with Community

by Karin Melberg Schwier

**W**hat do you think of these grapefruit?" I asked. The man jumped as though I had slapped him. He clutched his shopping cart, turned to me with his mouth open and blinked through his thick glasses. He was about 30 or so. He had Down syndrome. My 16-year-old stepson Jim has an extra chromosome, too.

I smiled and told him I couldn't decide. "Which do you like, white or red grapefruit?"

He swallowed. "Yeah," he said eyes wide.

At that moment, another man in a red ski jacket and neat beard hustled up to the shopping cart, dropped in a bag of potatoes and said, "Come on Bill, let's go."

Bill stood still and said proudly, with some difficulty, "I talk to lady."

"What? Okay, hurry Bill, we gotta go." But Bill didn't budge.

"We were talking about grapefruit," I offered, smiling again, still lingering and fingering the produce.

"Oh." The man in the red jacket looked at me almost apologetically and said.

"Come on Bill, we have to go." Before he finished speaking, the man in the red jacket had refocused his attention on the grocery list and jogged off. Bill, suddenly kick-started, steered the cart away. I ran into them a few more times in the store, purposefully taking my time when I saw Bill manoeuvring the cart down the aisle. The man in the red jacket would say, "Wait here," while he ran to select items, weigh bulk food and choose among the specials. Each time, Bill would stand silently at the cart, waiting. Each time he saw me, he almost seemed afraid I would ask him

something again; that he would be expected to reply. He was used to just waiting quietly.

The whole episode bothered me. Not because the man had a mental handicap, but because he was existing in a quiet, obedient vacuum while the world happened around him. And one of the people who could connect Bill to that world, the man in the red jacket, was too busy making all the decisions in isolation.

Connecting people with the community, establishing acquaintances, empowering people to become involved in the neighbourhood is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges advocates face. It is one thing to exist in the community; it is quite another to be a valued and welcome part of the vibrant fabric of the neighbourhood.

This is our challenge with our son, Jim - and our window of opportunity is small. Seasoned travellers since Rick and Char separated in 1982, the kids arrive from California each summer: Benjamin, 10; Erin, 13; and Jim, 16. Ben doesn't have too much trouble finding new friends on the block and Erin is already on the prowl for babysitting possibilities. Jim's Down syndrome has never hampered his easygoing sociability, but in our neighbourhood we don't know many teenagers. Having a couple of buddies for the summer may not seem like a big deal, but we feel responsible for creating connections while he's with us.

Although Jinn got a rousing cheer when he accepted his Grade 8 diploma during middle school graduation ceremonies, he went out to supper with his grandparents while his classmates (including his sister) went to graduation parties. He has never experienced peer tutoring or a friendship circle, never a sleep over or

phone calls from any classmates. He's in the marching band (he plays drums) and regular PE, and he's a member of the regular YMCA swim team. He's a fish in water and his coach works him hard; everyone cheered when Jim freestyled his way to earning a point for the team during the competition. (There's all that cheering again.)

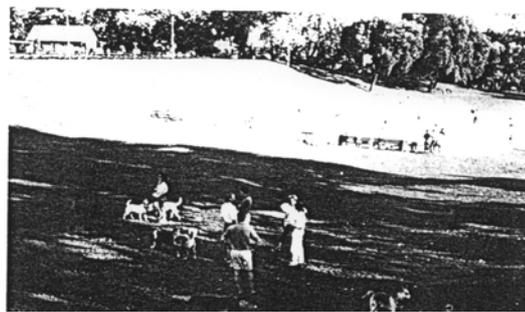
This year the school has Jim working with a job coach in a community based instruction program for two hours every day. He's in a band, photography and PE and some one-to-one in the special education room. Community based instruction is great, but we don't want Jim to miss out on the camaraderie, mischief, potential friends, fun and learning of highschool. We've encouraged the school to initiate connections with one or two of the multitudes of social clubs in the high school. While he lives with us during the summer, we want to help him forge a few connections of his own.

How do you orchestrate friends? Jim's name was listed again with an integrated buddy program run by the city; he'd had a great time with that each summer. But what about the neighbourhood? We decided we had nothing to lose, so a few months before the kids were to arrive, I wrote up an ad:

*My stepchildren live with us each summer; because they go to school in California, they don't always have an easy time making summer friends here. Jim, our oldest son, is 16. He loves basketball, swimming, and movies, video games and going for a Coke. He also has Down syndrome, so for Jim, making friends is a little tougher. If you're interested in meeting Jim, maybe going to a show, or an arcade, watersliding, bike riding or just hanging around, give us a call. Jim's a great guy with a good sense of*

*humour, but because he's labelled mentally handicapped, some people shy away and miss out on getting to know a neat person. No "special" friends, please, just ordinary ones!*

It appeared in the community association "Varsity View" newsletter and was circulated in our neighbourhood near the university. Within two days the phone began to ring ... and ring. We put a stack of scrap paper near the phone to write down names and phone numbers. A 17-year-old named Tara said she'd love to introduce Jim to her two dogs; does he like animals? Maybe they could take the dogs on a walk in the neighbourhood. We strained to hear shy 15-year-old David who knows what it's like not to have many friends; does Jim like computer games? Brothers Frank, 18, and Mark Salmon, 22, called. They were signed up with the leisure buddy program; when could they meet Jim? They were already making plans to hit the Waterslide Park. (Frank turned out to be the one who gave Jim his first driving lesson - out in the country, seatbelts securely fastened and even in his own car, They only hit the ditch three times on their first attempt.) A former student who had taken classes from Rick at the university called; she had spent some time with Jim the year before, sent him letters after he went back to California and wanted to stop in again this summer to say hello.



*Empowering people to become involved in the neighbourhood is a challenge.*

the glorious position of too many friends for Jim. It was beginning to look like we'd never see him ourselves! What a wonderful thing to complain about! Tara, who lived within walking distance sometimes, met Jim to walk her dogs. They went to see "Pretty Woman" at the Place Riel theatre on campus. (That night as I walked past his room in my night-gown, Jim declared. "Hubba, hubba!") Jim, Frank and Mark (and various other Salmon siblings) spent a tot of time at the Penguin Village waterslides, went for countless Cokes and just went off together in the car. We didn't always know where; that drove Jim's brother and sister wild with curiosity. They weren't used to their teenage brother just taking off with friends.

At the end of the summer, the night before the kids were flying back to Los Angeles, Jim asked me to help him write goodbye cards to Mark, Frank and Tara. He carefully printed "Thank you for the fun summer" on each and wrote down his address in California. He addressed each envelope and wanted to walk to the mailbox at the end of the block to post them himself. Jim's summer probably wouldn't seem out of the ordinary if we didn't compare his lack of friends with the rich assortment enjoyed year-round by Benjamin and Erin. We call every Sunday morning and hear detailed accounts from the younger two about their friends; who the best ones are and why, who has been scratched from the list this week and why. Birthday parties, sleepovers, school projects and shopping sprees all involve friends. But Jim's life revolves around his grandparents, younger cousins, his immediate family, a "program" of one sort or another.

Who does he have to tell if he thinks his parents are annoying or unreasonable? Who can he talk to if his sister and brother are dumb or

unbelievably mean? Who does he have to gossip with? Who does he have when he wants to talk about girls? Who can he call if he'd like to hang out at Burger King over french fries, a hamburger and a Coke? Who will he have when his parents are gone and his siblings have families of their own?

As advocates we must demand more than mere tolerance for Jim in society. It is as important for Jim to be a friend as it is for him to have them. It's important for Bill, the shy man in the grocery store, to make decisions about shopping, to take an active part in his everyday life, to learn the skills needed to interact with people as they spin by. Then, with any luck, Bill might have the courage to reach out when someone swirls past a little more slowly than the rest.

Traditionally, people with handicaps have been recipients, beneficiaries, the "done-for" rather than the "do for someone else". Imagine a life spent without ever giving; without ever being expected to be more than a receiver of someone else's "good deed" or paid service. We have ignored the basic human need to give something to another human being. Author Robert Perske writes in his book, *Circles of Friends*:

*As people talk to each other, persons with disabilities have been able to contribute their own unique richness to their friends and to the surrounding neighbourhoods as well. Therefore, I believe that friendships with people who have disabilities can provide an explosion of fresh values and directions, which this confused, misdirected world needs now as never before.*

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