

No limits – the liberating potential of a circle of support

“I will live by myself and make my own choices without being limited. I will have fun and travel.”

Simon’s vision statement

Simon is now 18 and some years back his parents, John and Teresa, wondered what his life would be after school and how he could establish his own social life outside the family. At this time, they felt they were running out of ideas.

In an effort to turn this around they read widely and attended workshops about future planning and circles of support. They made the decision to start a circle of support for Simon and began thinking about who they could invite.

“We didn’t need too many people (to join the circle) we just needed people who had an obvious and big interest in Simon” says Teresa.

Simon’s circle consists of eleven people - his parents, three siblings and their partners, his grandmother, neighbour and an honorary (3rd) grandmother.

There is an agenda set for every meeting, minutes are taken and circulated to circle members before the next meeting. Simon’s eldest brother is the chairperson and discussions are always followed up with action points. This way, it is easier to track what is being planned, who was responsible for it and whether it has been achieved.

“It requires some work and planning and it can be a challenge to find suitable dates when everyone can meet but it is well worth it. You need to be prepared and ready to facilitate discussions. This commitment communicates how important you think the purpose of the meetings is and that influences the other circle members to be committed also” comments Teresa.

The first meetings focused on immediate issues that were affecting Simon, like how to dress appropriately for his age and the weather. In this, John and Teresa say that the input of Simon’s siblings is invaluable. Having people in the circle of a similar age or generation as the focus person (of the circle) helps keep everything age appropriate. For example, Simon’s siblings can keep up the encouragement for Simon to be as independent as possible – including cooking and cleaning for himself. His parents may be more inclined to do

things for him, so it helps them let go and allow Simon to develop his skills.

Subsequent meetings moved on from immediate issues to brainstorming with Simon about the things he likes to do, so that the circle could write a personal vision statement for his future pursuits.

The result is the vision statement that opened this story. Simon's desire to travel is spurred on by his passion for wild animals across the world, particularly in Africa and Asia.

"Be open to ideas, let your imagination run wild when talking about vision and the future" encourage John and Teresa.

The circle has been running for two years and now meets every three months.

John and Teresa see the positive impact it has had in Simon's life. The circle has helped him to build his self-esteem, as the meetings are all about him and focus on his needs. At other family gatherings Simon may drift away because the pace and content of the conversation, between his siblings, makes it difficult for him to contribute. In circle meetings Simon gets his chance to speak and be heard and members are eager to wait for his answers.

Simon enjoys attending all the circle meetings and is always asked to provide input into the agenda being set for each meeting. His personal vision statement is re-visited every meeting to keep everyone's focus on his life's pursuits.

Every meeting, the circle discusses the things that Simon has achieved and John says that Simon's smile says it all. It is easy to see that he feels good about himself and why he looks forward to the next meeting.

For John and Teresa the circle brings them peace of mind that there is a committed group of people around Simon that will be able to keep the circle going beyond their own lifetime. They feel happy that the circle is helping to shape a plan and direction for Simon's life. This gives them satisfaction that Simon is not simply left to drift through his life in a meaningless way and that they are not plagued with nagging feelings that they should be doing more for Simon's future.

John and Teresa's advice to anyone thinking about starting a circle of support around their child is to start as soon as possible, it is well worth the effort.



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