

Everyday roles ~ The power of the familiar

by Janet Klees (2009)

Co-ordinator Deohaeko Support Network
Ontario, Canada

Janet Klees has interwoven her own family life with her husband and two children together with the lives of people with disabilities and families in community for over 25 years. She has been coordinator with the family-governed Deohaeko Support Network for the past 15 years and has been deeply affected by the lives of the people that she has come to know. Janet is the author of two books which are directly rooted in the Deohaeko experience, (*We Come Bearing Gifts*; *Our Presence has Roots*) as well as numerous other reports, documents, tools, and writings. Janet also works closely with other Scarborough, Ontario families, and several family groups and projects across Durham Region. All of Janet's work focuses on individually-designed arrangements and she is especially concerned that families are well-supported to think through practical, principled ways to ensure that their family members live meaningful, involved and secure lives within their communities. Her work is rooted in a social role valorization frame work and she is involved with valued-based initiatives, writing, and training across the GTA, Ontario, throughout Canada, and internationally as well.



Email: janet@legacies.ca

Community is a place where belonging and working together and collaboration are at its heart. Most people belong or want to belong or are working at being a part of a community. This is the work of community building, and it needs attention to make it happen every day.

Thinking about community for me, is interplay between using the principles of social role valorization and applying them intentionally in the work of community where they are the everyday strategies of all members.

There are many ways that I go about this but recently I've really begun to pay more attention to one powerful strategy which is to observe, mirror and build on everyday roles.

We are often inspired and awed by the large, life-defining roles that individuals with disabilities have achieved. These have often come about due, in large part, to the intervention of skilled and creative supporters, often as directed and guided by the vision of family members. These examples have taught us to aim high, seek richness and intensity, and embrace the richness of life. These are moments to relish the peak moments of life.

I'd like to turn to smaller, more subtle roles, that are in their own way, however, every bit as powerful, life-defining, and significant – and not only for the individuals who enter into them but also for the wider community in which they take place. However, these roles are intentionally fashioned and taken on in ways that are so ordinary, familiar, and yes, old fashioned that spending some time in this place feels like coming home.

These, I refer to as the big “little” roles – the everyday roles of family member, friend, and neighbour – not stunning in their originality, rarity or glamour but instead, are the life-sustaining everyday glue of communities and circles worldwide.

The power of these roles lays their accessibility. They are immediately recognized by others, they carry many positive images and associations for the bearer, they can be easily supported by others, they can be entered into immediately and reinforced with relatively few resources, and they make community life better for many.

Caroline is woman in her forties who loves music, organizing the world for herself and others, the Toronto Maple Leafs and her family roles. She is

“Aunt Carry” to her young nephew, Terry. This role is recognized with a certain set of expectations and responsibilities by her nephew certainly, but also by sister Barbara, grandparents Helen and George, neighbours and friends. As “aunt”, Caroline is asked about her nephew’s schooling, health and activities and Caroline is expected to know something about these. He attends the school at which she works and therefore she has even more solid knowledge of him. She buys him gifts, supervises his activities, attends his important moments, and is ever present in his life.

When we see “Aunt Carry”, we are also, consciously or not, aware that by virtue of being an aunt, Caroline is therefore also a sister, possibly a sister-in-law, and probably a daughter. By seeing her clearly as “Aunt Carry” – perhaps because she is often seen with young Terry in some active way – we are aware at some level that the family relations are fairly positive, that she is an aunt who is held in some esteem, and therefore that the other family roles are also held in some meaningful way.

As life-defining as these family roles are for Caroline, they take relatively few resources and only certain amounts of intention and thoughtfulness to support. Mom supports both of her daughters, in different ways, to be good sisters to one another and a good mother or aunt to young Terry. This is natural and fits in with Mom’s idea of what a good mother needs to do. It takes some extra thought to make sure Caroline has ongoing adult-aunt roles with her nephew, but the implementation of most of her actions are supported by family members and not paid support. When paid support might give a helping hand, it is not difficult to describe the kinds of actions for which Caroline may need support. This is familiar territory for supporters, many of whom are “aunt” themselves.

Tiffany is a delightful, engaging artist in her mid-thirties. When Tiffany met her friends for her birthday dinner recently, she was a friend among eight of her friends in celebration. Going out for dinner is a minor event; however, doing so in the company of others who choose freely to be with you leaves a powerful impression on the other restaurant patrons, on the restaurant hosts, on the friends themselves, and on Tiffany herself. Friends get together, friends celebrate and laugh, and friends keep the memory of these times alive. The images and memories of the friendships are much greater than any one interaction or event. The power is in the common and public memory of times together. When others see the group of friends at dinner

together, they know nothing about the quality of friendship of the individual women, but they do have strong experiences and memories of friendship of their own that they associate with the picture before them. Of all of the roles that they may cast Tiffany into at that table, it is the role of friend that is most familiar and recognizable to them.

It was easy for Tiffany’s friends to think about what they wanted to do to celebrate this birthday of hers (others have been more adventurous), and it was easy for them to talk about better ways to engage in their individual and group friendships. Ideas of using Facebook to communicate, ways to use current support to provide transportation, suggestions to take and share photos, and plans for a summer get together were natural because it is what friends do.

The people thinking about Tiffany’s support have been cautious and careful about deciding where and when to provide that support. Lots of support is provided to Tiffany to initiate occasions for the friends to talk, email and otherwise stay in touch. Lots of support is offered to make suggestions to friends for time spent together – Tiffany is assisted to invite friends frequently for tea, to accompany her to a local theatre production, to her home for a party or potluck dinner. Lately, even more support is offered to help Tiffany arrive at a friend’s home or joining friends out for dinner, with everything in place that she needs for a 2-3 hour unencumbered visit. The support person does not stay while the actual visit takes place, but arrives again to provide transportation home. This degree of assistance and flexibility makes it possible for busy young mothers and career women to engage in their friendships with Tiffany in the middle of their busy lives. For the time being, Tiffany is the friend with the greatest amount of time and flexibility, and so this is what she offers. At another point in life, this will be different. In fact, three years ago when she broke her hip, it was several of these friends that put other things on hold to be with Tiffany in hospital and during her long recovery at home. That’s life. That’s friendship.

Rob is a tall, quiet gentleman in his forties who likes nature and friends, and driving in a car. Awhile ago, his family and friends wanted to help Rob become a better-known neighbour in his housing co-operative. He had just come through a period of medical stress during which many neighbours would have seen far less of him, and may have seen him often in situations where he was unwell. We wanted to focus on ways that Rob was a positive and contributing neighbour in his community. We came up with the

idea of Rob selling tickets to his neighbours for a regular and wonderful prize draw. The prize would be a large gift basket filled with lovely items gathered through the donations of friends. The tickets would be very affordable, and the winner would always be a member of his housing co-operative. The proceeds would be given to a local charitable organization and the event would be well-advertised with flyers throughout the housing community and chances to view the basket itself at the co-operative office off the lobby. This has become a regular and welcome event at the co-operative. Neighbours talk about it and everyone chats about the latest winner.

More importantly, Rob has reasons to see and talk with his neighbours, on a frequent and regular basis and they have reasons to come and speak with him. They see him frequently and understand better how he communicates. Intuitive supporters have moved a number of these chats and exchanges to invitations for tea and visits. One neighbour has joined his circle of support; another neighbour has made a basket for one of his draws; and a third neighbour has suggested he take on a new delivery person role at the summer camp for kids.

This is what we are learning about the power and usefulness of these everyday roles.

Everyday roles are immediately recognized by others.

These roles are almost always recognized and reacted to by other people simply because they are almost universally held in some fashion by all people in our society. They are not roles held in a fad and swept away with the next rise in interest. They are not roles that are held by a rare few with a particular passion, interest or talent. They are common, every day and ultimately understood by most of the people in our communities. These everyday roles are us. We know them, carry them and feel them ourselves. In a deep way, they remind us of our solidarity with this person – our links, our commonality.

Everyday roles carry many positive images and associations in the minds of others.

When people see someone as “family member, neighbour or friend” they convey meaning to the role and its identity, much beyond the actual interaction at hand. Familiarity with these roles mean that we unconsciously associate all kinds of other positive and valued roles to the people we see in the actual role.

Everyday roles can be easily supported by others.

They can be supported by almost anyone because most people carry very positive and practical ideals of what these roles mean to us. There are, of course, personal variations but people with whom you share other common values will often hold ideas of friendship, family role and neighbour that will be comfortably in range of your own. In fact, people in a support role will even often reach for a higher ideal of friendship, family or neighbour given a chance to assist in bringing it into someone else’s life.

Everyday roles can be held and deepened with relatively few resources.

They can be entered into usually immediately and with whatever resources are at hand, because they are local, immediate and familiar. There are many interactions that can be supported with or without support dollars. Many parts of the role require no paid support at any time, even in an ideal situation. Family, friends and sometimes neighbours are already putting time and energy toward time with this individual, and by organizing that time a little bit more intentionally the roles can be come deeper and more meaningful.

Everyday roles make community and daily life better for many.

When one fully enters into being a great friend, a good neighbour, a supportive family member life becomes better for all.

Everyday roles are a powerful demonstration of “being the community we want to see”.

By seizing, entering more fully, and deepening the everyday roles around them, people are transported from being waiting, passive recipients of the benefits of the friendship from others, the good neighbourly gestures of others, and the gracious regard of loving family members. They become active instigators of the kind of community that many of us describe that we would like to see today – they become initiators of good friendship, they embody the role of great neighbour, and they become the stalwart, reliable family member on whom others can depend.

In other words, they themselves become the most powerful demonstration of being the community we want to see. The individuals themselves and the family and friends who love them are in a unique

position to know the kind of community in which they will thrive.

By demonstrating how this might be done, how others can and will become involved, and how it is good for us all they are showing us a way forward that is heartening, powerful and possible.

Since assisting people to take on everyday roles can be done immediately by almost anyone with a genuine capacity to appreciate the subtle gestures that hold our lives together, I'd like to offer a few strategies that make success even deeper and more likely.

1. Reach back to old-fashioned values.

Imagine ways to hold the role that emphasize a time when more things were hand made and when there was more time for thoughtful gestures. There is a quality and a depth to these kinds of gestures that speak deeply into the heart and desires of many people. In a busy world, acts and offers that reflect time spent (handmade cards, homemade food) are even more joyfully received.

2. Try to imagine what the other person might truly need.

Take the time to put yourselves into the shoes of the other person. Imagine what a friend, a brother, or a neighbour might truly need at this time. Think about what the best of all sisters would be like, or the best friend at this time when your friend has just had a baby, or what a fantastic neighbour might do or be. This gives us a richness of opportunity that we can assist a person to bring to the role.

3. Start small and keep all promises.

Think carefully of what is truly in your control to assist or provide on a regular basis. Offer only what you can follow up on. Community is not built on broken promises, but on small, regular commitments that are kept faithfully.

4. Don't wait for others to initiate.

Too often, I hear about people wishing that neighbours were more friendly, or friends more available, or siblings more attentive. Growing up, I learned the adage, "when everything is said and done/To have a friend you must be one". This holds true for being the one to welcome and get to know the neighbours, for being the one to begin to contact siblings on a regular basis, or for being the one to keep up the communication of friendship. You do it – or you assist the person to do it.

5. Don't play tit for tat.

Do not to fall into the game of only offering or reciprocating once. Life is not a badminton match. Every one of your actions will not be reciprocated before you make your next move. Sometimes it takes several offers, advances, or initiatives before we get any kind of response from the other. However, if you make your advances with a good and open heart for all the right reasons, your gestures are not reliant on the other's prompt return of energy or favour. It is not the response of the other that makes the initiator a better sister, better neighbour or better friend. It is the actions of the person in the role that decide what kind of friend, neighbour or brother they are!

6. Make the offer cannot be refused.

It is worthwhile to spend some time thinking about what is the most natural, kind and thoughtful gesture or offer to be made. Emails and letters of thoughtful support and interest to family members at university or living far away will not be refused. Offering to bring in a bag of groceries for a neighbour with her arms full will not be refused. Being clear on what would be helpful and supportive will result in acts that are ordinary, helpful and gratefully accepted. Therefore, use yourself as gauge – does this seem like a logical next step for a friend, neighbour or family member to you? Is it comfortable? Trust your instincts because each of us lives these roles fully every day.

7. Be generous; be effusive.

Because we are assisting people to make offers of old-fashioned hospitality and friendship, we may feel like we are offering too much, giving too much away. However, consider that the world needs more – more smiles, more baked cookies, more chatty, newsy emails from home, and more of the ordinary things that people would do for each other if they just had time.

8. Do it for yourself – Be the community...

In the end, whether you are in a paid support role or not, we need to enter into the work at hand because we know it is good for us, for our own families and our own neighbours and friends. We need to begin to be the community we say that we want to see around us. Our work may bring us to lead our own lives a little bit differently at home; or our family lives with a family member with a disability may bring us to approaching our work lives differently. Ultimately it starts with each one of us.