**Reflections on OADSP: After the OPRA Conference: April, 2013**

*How We Got Here and How Lucky We Are to Have the Team We Have in Place Now*

I have attended a lot of professional conferences in our field and others. I have organized a lot of conferences. I have attended a lot of OPRA Conferences. At this OPRA Spring Conference, 2013, there were essential sessions on policy, Medicaid, benefits, regulations and the like. But in Conference Room 1V, the Direct Support Professional track, I was reminded about why we do this work in the first place. How this grant, that began with an idea and $50,000 in 2001, has blossomed into this treasure of opportunities for DSPs and the people they support to grow and thrive is awe inspiring.

*First, A Little Personal History*

In 1995 I attended my first meeting of NADSP. I first became a residential provider in 1980 and from that day forward realized that the key thing, the essential thing, regardless of the philosophy of the day, the model of service, the size of the place, or the severity of the disability, was the quality and commitment of the direct support staff and the support provided to them by their organization.

We called them aides, attendants, care workers; we paid them poorly and gave them ridiculous job descriptions. Job descriptions that talked about making beds and giving baths and getting people ready, often ready to sit around the do nothing until the next meal, group outing or doctor’s appointment. Over time, we learned about the community, we learned about being person centered, we learned all kinds of things, but the most important factor was always the quality of the direct support professional.

NADSP was formed by leaders who got *it* and lead the initial activities on a national level; Marianne Taylor, Amy Hewitt, advocates, self-advocates and people like me around the country, who realized we had to do something. In Ohio we began talking more formally in 1998. People came together and said what are we going to do to get a competent, professional, stable direct support professional workforce. Providers, advocates, self-advocates and a group who realized that regardless of how we labeled the service, regardless of what form we put our ihp’s, iep’s, isp’s on, the key was the DSP.

We talked about what to do. A personal aside: in 2000 my family and I experienced a tragedy in our lives, so I asked Tony Thomas to begin to represent Ohio with NADSP; what a good decision that was. While I was in the early stages of rebuilding my life, Maureen Corcoran, then the Executive Director of OPRA, approached me about coordinating a new effort: a grant from the DD Council guided by Fatica Ayers, designed to develop a professional direct support workforce in Ohio. So we began with an idea, a little bit of money, committed volunteers, an RFP, a great consultant in Marianne Taylor and we took off. PATHS was formed out of that group and from that idea to the incredibly robust and rich program and organization DSPATHS and OADSP has become today.

*Where Are We Today*

So while the administrators and directors attended the critical sessions at this OPRA Spring Conference on the business of running these programs, a group of about 70 people had an opportunity to share their stories and learn from films about creating a world of full inclusion. They learned about how those with seemingly the most severe disabilities can express their creativity and feelings through artwork and how photography can be used. They saw that the creativity and hard work that DSPATHS candidates do in their work samples and portfolios and in their everyday interactions with people make a difference.

Those of us who began OADSP had no idea where we would end up. We had a vision, but we had to create it from scratch. Well sitting in Conference Room 1V yesterday, hearing the stories, laughing and crying with all these great people was affirming and extraordinary. DSPATHS is all about providing DSPs with the tools and information to do their jobs, the sessions on art; inclusion, photography, puppetry and even trauma provided an opportunity to see how all this hard work is permeating the lives of people everyday.

Since 2001 when we began the right people have appeared to move this program forward. The team we have in place now is incredible. Our virtual, flexible structure allows them to build upon their greatest talents and strengths. I have worked for a long time and had an interesting, successful and varied career. This team we have now, more than other teams that I have worked with, just gets *it*. They understand the job of the DSP; they understand the intent and purpose of the DSPATHS program and the mission and vision of OADSP. They each work hard within their areas of expertise to make it happen.

A shout out to each of their strengths from Bethany’s ability to put together this enthusiastic, insightful and thoughtful program, from Katrina’s ability to develop great materials and organize the many things we do, from Lisa’s ability to create phenomenal DSP events year in and year out, from Kevin’s steady hand at guiding the statewide regional operations, along with selling kits and teaching, from Deb’s curriculum writing to the OADSP Board of Director’s commitment to making it all work. Of course I could go on and on.

We are at a great place. As we get ready to introduce the new curriculum matrix, offer various courses to an array of people in a variety of places and move forward into the future we are so fortunate. I believe we will even have a balanced budget for 2013.

I can’t believe where we began as an idea, where I began personally and where we are all now, thank you all so much.

With gratitude: Amy Gerowitz: Executive Director OADSP – April 19, 2013