

Building a Vision for Excellence

ONE OF THE BIGGEST problems I have always seen in special education is the dark cloud that continuously seems to limit our vision to achieving only what is “appropriate” or in compliance with what the law requires. I am truly amazed at how much money and energy goes into watching so many people dance around laws, with the goal not being about creating outcomes for our children, but rather to uphold enough compliance to avoid losing state and/or federal funding. We should all begin to understand that the biggest problem with special education is not disability, but rather the tremendous investment that goes into shooting for such low expectations, and the boundaries and limitations we have all confined ourselves to. If you think about winning people and great leaders, the last thing they would ever do is huddle their teams together to give them speeches about shooting for “appropriate.” Could you imagine where the Yankees would be if their coach set the standard of play at “appropriate,” or the vision toward just achieving the basic standards or rules of the game?

Vision begins with people who are willing to step up to the plate and not only expect more, but to become leaders and living examples in their own lives by demonstrating how it can be done. When I started Pathways, I was fortunate to have inexperience on my side. I hardly knew anything, so I had nothing to lose by trying everything. There is no doubt that a child with disabilities may see the world differently, but many people see this as a problem, not a gift. We need to stop thinking in terms of how we must change these children to conform to our expectations, and instead let them show us new ways to teach and broaden our scope of how we learn and set the rules of the game. In reality, we need to understand who limits



whom, and how we as adults need to channel our children away from the three-by-three boxes we have made into the possibilities they see.

An example is when I asked the children in our *Project Win-Win* employment class to describe their dreams and vision for their future. Some said music, and chose being a disc jockey. Pathways had no money for the equipment, and I personally had a strong reputation for being one of the most technologically illiterate people around. But today, we have state-of-the-art disc jockey equipment and the kids have taught me how to use it. We started out with a deathly fear of speaking into a microphone, especially in front of big crowds. None of us really knew much about dancing or being master of ceremonies. We have now overcome all that, and we don't think twice about teaching people how to dance the Macarena or “Cotton-Eyed Joe” — and our vision did not stop there!

The kids keep pushing their vision to new heights, and since that time we have taken a trip to master the chaos of New York City and are now planning overnight ventures that I am sure will turn into trips to who knows where!! The word “appropriate” does not exist in our world, and Pathways never stops to consider the limitations of IDEA. We live for excellence and to help each other achieve our best, whatever that may be. The best thing about having vision is that it takes personal sacrifice, but does not need to be expensive or cost anything. In fact, when you have vision, the resources needed always seem to channel in that direction like a magnet, because vision draws great leaders who also dare to dream to your cause. People of vision welcome accountability and opportunities to gather data and monitor outcomes — not because federal governments mandate it — but because accountability shows the reality of where we are. That reality must then be used to set the moral compass and vision for where we need to go.

Special education needs to set that vision and become a leader in education — because it can and should be setting the pace for excellence. My challenge to everyone is to set that vision and develop a commitment to rise to excellence, because when we do, our children will. There is no vision in setting our sights to “appropriate.” Dream a little bigger, expect a little more, and develop the innocence many of our children have to believe “the sky is the limit.” They have taught me to reach for the impossible and that limitations only exist when we stop dreaming and lower our expectations. Vision starts with us and ends with us. The challenge: Never stop aspiring to a vision of excellence!!

— Melinda Jennis,
President, Pathways for Exceptional Children

Pathways Conference Packed with Vision for the Future



Dream
It
Forward

On November 14, 2009, Pathways held its annual conference with 150 in attendance. The day was filled with people who have been touched in many ways by Pathways' vision to redefine disability and make "authentic" inclusion a reality.

Two days before the event, our keynote speaker, Dr. Mary Shea of "Kids Included Together" in San Diego, California, flew to New Jersey to visit our classes and meet with our Board of Trustees, Officers and Lead Mentors to share ideas and brainstorm. Her advice and consulta-

tions provided us with new vision and ways in which we can excel.

President Melinda Jennis described the conference as a way for people to truly see what Pathways is about. She explained that she is often on the road speaking about all the things we have accomplished, and how so many communities have now become involved with our programs. The conference brought these leaders and mentors together to speak and share their achievements. The best thing about the

day was that 20% of those in attendance were children both with and without disabilities, many of whom spoke about programs they have helped to develop and been involved in!

A special thanks to the leaders from RiverVale, Cranford, Morristown, and Morris Plains for presenting and for the time they have taken to train mentors and begin programs for children with special needs. They have been examples of communities that have taken on the challenge to excel!!

Dream It Forward — Pathways Recognizes Excellence!

Each year, Pathways gives awards to people who have made personal sacrifices to excel and go beyond what most would expect. Pathways has worked with the senior residents at The Chelsea at Montville for the past five years. Many of them have become our friends and adopted grandparents. They have helped us learn to bake, practice food service skills, dance, sing, read, and so much more that it is truly hard to paint the full picture. Two of the residents — "Grandma"



Ruth and "Uncle" Al — have especially touched our hearts. They come to almost everything we do, and the children of Pathways voted them our 2009 "People of the Year." Shown here with Melinda Jennis are Ruth Goldberg and Al Sierchio, proudly holding their awards. They are our cheerleaders, greatest advocates, and a very special part of our family!



GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) began its relationship with Pathways in 2007

through helping to sponsor one of our baseball Home Run Derbies. Since that time, Pathways and GSK have partnered in volunteering and helping neighboring communities. The employees of GSK Consumer Healthcare in Parsippany have volunteered in our *Magic of Reading* program to read to our kids and in our *Project Win-Win* employment program. Two of the GSK volunteers came to our "Pet Care" track and brought their own dogs along to meet the kids. Everyone was thrilled!! The staff has participated in our 5K, both running and volunteering to help on the day of the event. One individual even donated profes-

sional game tickets for the kids to see the JETS play football. It was with great honor that GlaxoSmithKline was voted "Business of the Year" for 2009 by Pathways for their genuine and continued support.



Recreation Programs: Upcoming programs are posted on our website at the beginning of each month. You can visit www.PathwaysKids.org and click on "Children's Programs," or the Recreation Department's website: www.montvillenj.org. Click on Municipal Services, then Parks & Recreation, then Forms & Flyers.



Redefining the future for people with disabilities.