



NEWSLETTER

Community Life and Meaningful Work for People with Disabilities

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Voices, of Every Kind

“How do you create a community where everybody has a metaphorical voice even if some people don’t use literal voice to make their wishes known?”

—Dan McKanan, Professor, Harvard Divinity School

Our job at High Spirit, each day, is to slow down and to listen intentionally to those of us in the community who speak with their own language. We struggle, as visitors to a foreign country, trying to learn the local language, while also keeping at front of mind that the person we are trying to communicate with lives his or her life each day with that same feeling of unsettled fears or loneliness that arise in a foreign country where communication is difficult. We realize that part of creating the change we want to see in the world starts within our own community, particularly, within the ways we engage in our relationships with one another. It is this part of our work that takes immense intentionality, as we navigate through our daily interactions with all members of our community.

The intentional work may look like this: You are preparing to have dinner with your household of five—you and your partner, a volunteer intern and two men with special needs. You’ve prepared dinner with care, keeping everyone’s health and wellbeing in mind. It’s warm and it’s ready. You encourage everyone to find their place at the table, and look forward



Will and Courtney

to a restorative household supper, following a long day of hard work. As everyone settles in, you encourage everyone to enjoy their dinner.

After a while you realize that everyone has finished their meal and is ready to move on for the evening...except Will, who is stuck. Will is paused, fork in hand, looking at his meal but not eating. He stares earnestly at his bowl of soup. He can see all the ingredients and because of this, his meal doesn’t make sense. Each ingredient, the carrots, the meat, the rice, it should all be separated on a plate. Because of this Will is convinced his fork is the most appropriate utensil, no matter how hard you try to convince him otherwise. He insists on eating his soup with a fork, making the task of eating what is in front of him difficult.

It’s possible that after such a long day, you might find yourself hoping that the meal would end soon. Maybe Will can just switch utensils to make the process of eating easier. The reality though, is that such a task—switching utensils *in the middle of a meal*—is an impossible task when such an action doesn’t exist within someone’s schemas.

Later, when everyone has completed their bedtime routine and you have found a quiet moment to talk with your partner about dinner, and reflect on the quandary, you realize how important these schemas are, not just to Will, but to all of us. Will, and all of us, rely on them every day—essential tools that help us make sense of the world.



Austin and Bar

Voices, of Every Kind, continued

We all have things in our worlds that anchor us—the familiar things that give us a sense of place and space. When someone moves through the world with abilities and capacities that vary from our own, it can be outright impossible to switch utensils in the middle of the meal because that schema— x utensil pairs with y serving vessel—might be the only thing anchoring them to a sense of place and space in their world at that moment. Thus, through an inability to just switch utensils, this resident is using his metaphorical voice to advocate his needs and desire for autonomy in a world that often might not make sense to him. The caveat is that someone must listen to this person with an open mind.

Through further reflection, we arrive at some basic truths. We can slow down. Will cannot speed up. So, we do what is within our capacity and by doing so, together we enjoy the meal. By honoring the routine that has been established Will finds his footing and is able to proceed. We are communicating and we are in synch.

Despite the long day, you sit with Will until the meal is finished, accompanying and encouraging him to take more small bits in with his fork, even as you know that a long bedtime routine of more must-dos and cannot-dos are still ahead.

“People who don’t communicate in the ways prescribed within dominant society still communicate quite clearly, if we are willing and able to listen. And that willingness and ability to do so, it seems, only come from doing that intra-personal work. Thus, in addition to High Spirit being a place that encourages and promotes self-advocacy with those of differing abilities, we also take the time to reflect and talk through what our values and assumptions are to continue evolving in our capacities to hear in different ways.”

—Courtney Santasero, High Spirit Crew Leader

As a community we determinedly listen to the voices of everyone, working to learn the language of each person—whether we designate them to have special needs or not—and to respond in a way that strengthens communication. It is challenging work indeed, but when the moments of real hearing, or of being heard, happen, it creates a burst of joy. We have navigated around an obstacle, to connection. Joy.

Imagine a world where we leave more time and space to do the kind of reflective work that integrates multiple perspectives and realities, a world where our relationships are the catalyst for life-changing support...how different might that world look?

Our Grange Is Nearing Completion!

At long last we are finishing construction on our big barn, which we call the Grange, harking back to the 19th-century use of the word: a place for farmers to gather for meetings and social activities.

The Grange will be home to indoor workshop space on the ground level. The upstairs lofted space will include a kitchen to prepare meals and to serve as a food processing and preservation area. The large, welcoming space will allow us to sit all together for lunch, and to host potluck dinners and activities with other shared living homes.

We’re terrifically excited to have this new space available to us before the hardest part of the winter sets in. In the past, the connections among Houses and to Day Program participants has been limited to the winter days in which we could be



Grange interior

outdoors or to the number of workers who could fit around the table in one of our houses. Now crews can continue their work in a heated and ample space.

The Grange construction also includes a small office addition for our Agency Director, Justin Roccabruna. Justin is looking forward to moving out of shared space in Aurora House, to a proper office. Having Justin on-site, available

for consultation and easy conversations, facilitates connections, collaboration, oversight and support for our staff and residents.

Fund raising for the project has been a multi-year effort, and we are so glad to be able to say, at last, that we will be in the Grange this winter! We are deeply grateful to all our donors who have supported this work.



Grange exterior, showing new office and shaft for elevator

It Was Another Bountiful Year on the Farm

Last year, by the end of the growing season, we had harvested over 1,800 pounds of produce! The best year ever! This accomplishment followed two years of work expanding our gardens, and then, during our Covid lockdown, spending the growing season entirely on the farm. We focused on staying healthy and on working the gardens and caring for animals. No trips to the lake or outings for ice cream, but lots of wonderful farm work: planting, nurturing and harvesting.

This year we had fewer volunteer coworkers, since the international students we have relied on in previous years were not able to come. Short staffed, we were not able to keep up with recording the weight of our harvest, so we will celebrate instead the quality of what we made and enjoyed:



Homegrown salsas, sauces and pesto, great salads and stir-fries every week, and even donations of produce to the local food bank.

And, thanks to vaccinations, we were able to visit other farms, volunteering at our neighboring Moon in the Pond Farm, and apple and pumpkin picking this fall.



Another acre of gardens



Brett and Randy in the garden



Randy collecting eggs



Paul and Austin



Will sorting cucumbers



Justin Roccabruna

Welcome Justin Roccabruna, Agency Director

Justin took over as Agency Director in September and has been warmly welcomed by the community. Justin has an extensive background working with people with developmental disabilities. He has worked in job training, employment support, family and individual advocacy and crisis management, residential program support and in case management. Most recently Justin has been a supervisor of care providers in shared living homes. We are so glad to have you at High Spirit Justin!

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Visit our website to contact us, see more photos or to make a donation online:

www.HighSpirit.org

Courtney and Brett

It is with great joy that we introduce you to our newest Crew Leaders, Courtney Santasero and Brett Kane. We first met Courtney and Brett when we received their application for coworker positions. It was clear that these two were Crew Leader caliber:

Brett has his Master of Science in Criminal Justice Administration. His thesis was titled “Restorative Justice and Recidivism: Successful Reintegration through Connection to Community.” Most recently Brett has been an Adjunct Faculty Member at Hilbert College, teaching new students the skill of critical thinking. For many years Brett worked with a Challenger Baseball League team, assisting players with intellectual and physical disabilities. He loved that experience and has stayed close to players. Brett has received academic, service, and employment awards too numerous to include here, but for a flavor they include awards for outstanding community service, for scholarship, leadership and service upon graduation from college and grad school. Brett is excited to join the High Spirit community, to pursue his interest in community development and to experience life in an intentional community.

Courtney’s résumé starts with “*My mission in life is to provide interactions and experiences that facilitate growth, education, and relationship-building.*” This alone feels like a good match for High Spirit! Recently Courtney has been working as an Education Specialist and Case Manager for the Buffalo Urban League, Buffalo, NY, where her work included helping individuals transition to higher education, vocational training or next career steps, including by helping them resolve barriers to those goals. She too has a Master of Science in Criminal Justice, with a certificate in Restorative Practices, and is a cofounder of the Niagara Alliance for Restorative Practices. Her background is full of relevant experience, including facilitating social skills groups, supporting youth in therapeutic foster care services. Her interest in cultivating self-sustaining

communities and understanding of the importance of food sovereignty in them makes farming at High Spirit particularly exciting to her.

Brett and Courtney have been dedicated to building and supporting community and improving the wellbeing of people experiencing challenges. Courtney and Brett trained under Austin and Ashley for a number of months. They are now leading Seekonk House and run crews in the Day Program as well, bringing wonderful energy to their work. We are enormously excited to have Courtney and Brett at High Spirit!



Courtney and Brett

Goodbye Austin, Ashley and Levi

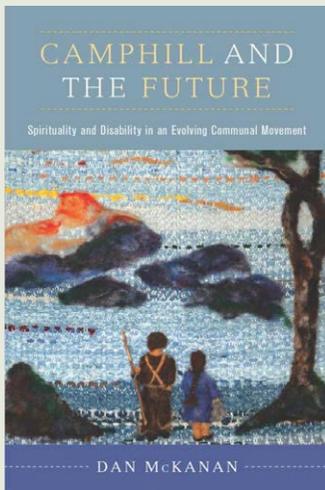
This past winter Austin and Ashley Smith, longtime Crew Leaders, decided to move back to Pennsylvania where they could be closer to family, including grandparents and cousins to their son Levi. Austin and Ashley have given us many years of warm and thoughtful work, bringing peace and joy to every interaction. They have been extraordinary in their ability to give support and care with a quiet and unhurried manner, giving residents the time they need for each task at hand. Austin and Ashley are also dear friends with the other Crew Leaders. They will be deeply missed by residents and their families, and by everyone in the community. Austin, Ashley, Levi—thank you. We wish you all the best in your new ventures!

Thank You and Goodbye to Jennifer Leveroni

Jennifer became High Spirit's first Agency Director in 2017 when we became licensed with DDS to oversee our residential program. During her years with us, Jen led us through the inclusion of the third High Spirit house, the acquisition of our license to provide day programming, the processes of compliance with DDS regulations, and the designation of High Spirit as a pilot program for our model of care. This was a time of great change and challenge and Jen navigated it—all without an actual office and through a pandemic! Jen has moved to a great new job in the Department of Developmental Services. We are so grateful to Jen and wish her the best.

Recommended reading:

Campbell and the Future: Spirituality and Disability in an Evolving Communal Movement



Article:

My Disabled Daughter Showed Me that None of Us are Independent, by Aimee Christian

<https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2021/04/23/disability-daughter-independence-school-aimee-christian>

High Spirit Community Farm

fulfills an essential need for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities by providing meaningful work, a dignified home and a rich social and cultural life. To that end High Spirit:

- Provides and supports homes where our community members live as a family.
- Directs a farm program, offering on the job training in agricultural work and sustainable practices.
- Expects our members to be responsible, participatory, considerate citizens of the High Spirit community and the larger world.
- Trains young volunteers to provide care to disabled peers and inspires them to be leaders as respectful, inclusive and conscientious adults.
- Serves as a catalyst for investment in this model of care, community and service.

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We are deeply saddened by the loss of three long-time supporters of High Spirit:

Dr. William Cochran, grandfather to his namesake Will Cochran; Dr. Edwin Maynard, grandfather to Bar Swain; and Harriet Jones, dear family friend of Rory Adams.