

family

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Record

215

File Number

10190

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Title: Julie and me

Original source: Citizen Advocacy A.C.T. Newsletter

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 06/07/88

Publisher Info: CA ACT

Abstract

Christina Coombs tells the story of becoming a citizen advocate and how she and the person she advocated for built their relationship. **Keyword: Advocacy**

JULIE AND ME

What an adventure this has been, and oh the wonder of where this liaison will take us, Julie and me. The first time we met I can remember thinking "*what am I doing here?*", nothing in my life's experiences could be called on to show me the way. *Mother and child, baby boy just one day old, where do I get my sign posts from, which way do I go?* I felt numb, Julie would not look at me and I was in awe of trespassing into another's terrain. Magnetised, I stumbled, groped, wondered, and this is how it was for quite some time. The questions of *What am I doing here? Does Julie need me? Why do I need Julie?* kept pounding in my head.

It was the beginning of a new discovery, discovery about me, discovery about Julie. Challenging and thought provoking, it caused me a lot of discomfort. I found myself questioning my values, what was important to me and what wasn't, and all the time the question "*What can I do for Julie that will be of value to her?*" I was still in the superior role and the struggle went on, I couldn't get past her facade, it never dawned on me to think about what Julie could do for me.

Feeling one day at my lowest I came out with the words "*Do you think I'm a social worker or a welfare person?*" "*Do you think I get paid to care about you?*" a quiet miracle occurred. Julie needed to think about me, *Who was I? What was I there for? What was I about?* I needed the challenge of complete honesty and vulnerability. She could have said "*I'm OK*" and shut down, if I went on her past behaviour patterns she would. She didn't, a quiet something special happened.

The urgency of finding a home for mother and child had been taken care of, the practical day to day affairs of living, and a new baby had been attended to, *What more can I do* I wondered; *nothing, it's all been done. Yes it's all been done, what a lesson for me to learn. Yes you can fix the exterior world, make it tidy, make it work, but what about what's going on in Julie's inside world?*

The vision of boxes flashed through my mind. I had fallen into the trap I most wanted to avoid, the trap of having Julie conform to my way, society's way, after all it would make it all neat in the files of Welfare, no bumps, no hassles, Julie is doing well! But by whose standards, whose life's map was this; mine, bureaucracy's or Julie's?

I'm sure Julie sensed my struggles. She would disappear for three to four days at a time, the worry of where they were, how they were was extreme. A glazed look would cross her face whenever we (welfare worker, Julie and I) spoke of what was best for her. The memory of those who "knew better" haunted me. "*She can't look after herself, let alone a baby! She can't cope! Can't even feed herself*", they said. *Were they right? Was this all madness?*

In this turbulence of self-questioning and doubt my little miracle took place. "*Julie,*" I asked "*you never ring me to let me know if you're okay. Do you remember my phone number? Do you need me?*" A silent ponderous look crossed her face, time stood still. "*Yes*" was the answer that came back to both

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questions ... a thoughtful yes. I was amazed at how Julie rattled off my phone number. It had been two long months since I had given it to her, and yet it popped out of her mouth so fluently. *"Gosh how do you do that?"* was my reply, *"I need to write everything down and still have trouble remembering."* A silent smile crossed her face. Just when I was exhausted and ready to throw the towel in, the balance occurred.

Julie had been resisting in a most passive way, quietly, stubbornly resisting. How many like Julie are pushed along like the tide. Keep everything spick and span, keep everything in its place, and everything is fine, our fast society leaves a lot to be desired. Julie's resistance was in fact a silent call of *"See me! Hear me! I need some help but I don't need you to take the reins."*

Julie now had a choice, did she need me? If so, then also the responsibility of keeping in touch went with it. She took up the challenge of choice, quietly at first, then little by little she let me into her inner world. She never let on to anyone she could read. Why run the risk of being labelled a slow learner, intellectually disabled and all the other labels that society has to offer. *"You turkeys in your fast world, you leave me no space to flex my muscles so I can see what I can do so I'll shut down, how else can I survive?"* were her unsaid words.

So that's Julie and me, I've learnt to take a back seat, not to run at a thousand miles an hour, the value of unconditional friendship and so much more.

Julie is flexing the muscles of her self esteem, (maybe for the first time in her life) extending her boundaries, and finding hidden talents. There is a smile on her face, an open happy smile, she's taking control, marching to the beat of her own inner drummer, at her pace and her style. She's open to suggestions and looks at her options, she is no longer pushed along with the tide.

We harass each other, giggle and have serious talks about budgeting, food, relationships, clothes and the myriad of things one talks about with friends. She makes me porridge, I make her coffee. *"Hey Christina I'll write that number down, you know how hopeless you are at remembering phone numbers."* We found our balance. Yes it has been an adventure and will keep being an adventure, as Julie unfolds her life's map.

Christina Coombs
6th July 1988