

*family*

A D V O C A C Y

## Community Unity

*Ric Thompson*

“We live in community, we move between communities, we even have Government Departments called Communities, but do we really know community?”

It is acknowledged that there are over 100 definitions of community. John McKnight, from North Western University in Chicago, USA, offers us a powerful definition, which invites us and takes us beyond our traditional thinking of what community may mean to us. John’s definition is as follows:

*Community can be defined as the social place, used by family, friends, neighbours, neighbourhood associations, schools, clubs, civic groups, local enterprises, churches, ethnic organisations, temples, local unions, local government and local media.*

This definition is known as an associational definition of community, owing to the collective nature of the groupings identified within the definition. The reference to social place, infers that community is more than a physical place, but a place that offers a sense of social connectedness for people, a connectedness which is of an interdependent nature, where we all rely on each other for what we bring to each other.

John McKnight’s definition invites us to see beyond those traditional groupings, such as schools, clubs, and neighbours to include new possibilities such as local enterprise (businesses), local unions, local government and local media outlets.

John McKnight and his colleague Jody Kretzman, recognise that when we dissect the full potential of community we can see that there are 5 groupings that may be considered as key assets that exist within most communities. They are:

- the **individuals (citizens)** of the community
- the **associations (clubs/groups)** that are voluntarily formed within communities

- the **institutions**, those more formal organisations that exist within the community that offer the more traditional services, such as schools, hospitals, libraries, Tafe Colleges, Universities etc.
- the **physical space** that not just occupies community, but also serves the interests of community, whether they be parks, gardens, bike paths, swimming pools, walking tracks etc.
- The **business sector**, those commercial enterprises that may offer the economic security within community.

When we dissect community in this way we start to see its full potential. But there is more?

For when we take each sub-section or group opportunity and seek out a further 10 opportunities, then we start to see the real potential of community unity. The use of the number 10, comes from the 'creative thinking' tool known as 'The Power of 10', developed by Dr Edward de Bono. The use of the 'Power of 10' is when we deliberately and intentionally call upon the multiple of 10 to take us beyond our traditional thinking. An example of this is if we are aware that within our community there are 700 community groups/clubs, and if we are of the view that there may be a further 10 community inclusion opportunities within each club/group then we have a potential 7,000 opportunities. All communities are rich communities, all we have to do is discover them. Recently, the organisation I work for called upon John McKnight's definition of community, to research the number of opportunities identified within the definition, and then after multiplying these opportunities through the use of the 'Power of 10' we identified over 1.8 million opportunities within our community alone.

It is with this belief in the potential of community that the service, which I manage, was formed in 1992. Inclusion Works, has as its mission – "Inclusion Works is a community organisation that helps build better communities, through the inclusion of people with a disability". Its mission is further strengthened through the commitment to 3 Foundation Principles that help guide the operation of the service.

These 3 Foundation Principles are:

1. You have to believe that people with a disability have *a place in community*, and the *capacity to contribute* to the development of community.
2. You have to believe that *some* community members have the *capacity and willingness to welcome* people with a disability and their families.
3. You have to *let go*.

It is acknowledged that successful community inclusion will not occur if we focus on the deficiencies and needs argument, rather than the assets that people bring. We need to make a decision as to how we wish to define the glass - as half full or half empty.

## The Dilemma . . .



Consultant Michael Kendrick, captures this when he defines community inclusion as follows -

“Community inclusion is when you are known by name, know others by name and your contribution is acknowledged, valued and supported”.

Michael Kendrick’s definition further reinforces the importance of the concept of inter-dependence, as distinct from independence, whereby interdependent relationships depend on each other, and the gifts, talents and contributions that people may bring to the table.

When we think of one’s gifts, talents and contributions we can be assisted in this by asking of ourselves, what gifts of the **head** (knowledge and experience) does this person bring, what are the gifts of the **heart** (passions/beliefs) does the person bring and finally what gifts of the **hand** (skills) does the person bring.

But it is not just the gifts of the individual that make strong communities, it is also community itself that makes strong communities. There is value in pausing to reflect on John McKnight’s definition of community again and asking of ourselves how many of those associational groupings do we presently have a relationship with or know of and what others do we see as having future potential relationships with.

Nican, an organisation based in Canberra, dedicated to the promotion of sport, recreation, tourism and the arts for people with a disability, produced a postcard highlighting the characteristics that are present when people are not members of a community and likewise those characteristics that are present in the lives of people with a disability when they are. This card is a powerful reminder of the consequence of exclusion and, equally important, the rewards that go with community inclusion and full participation.

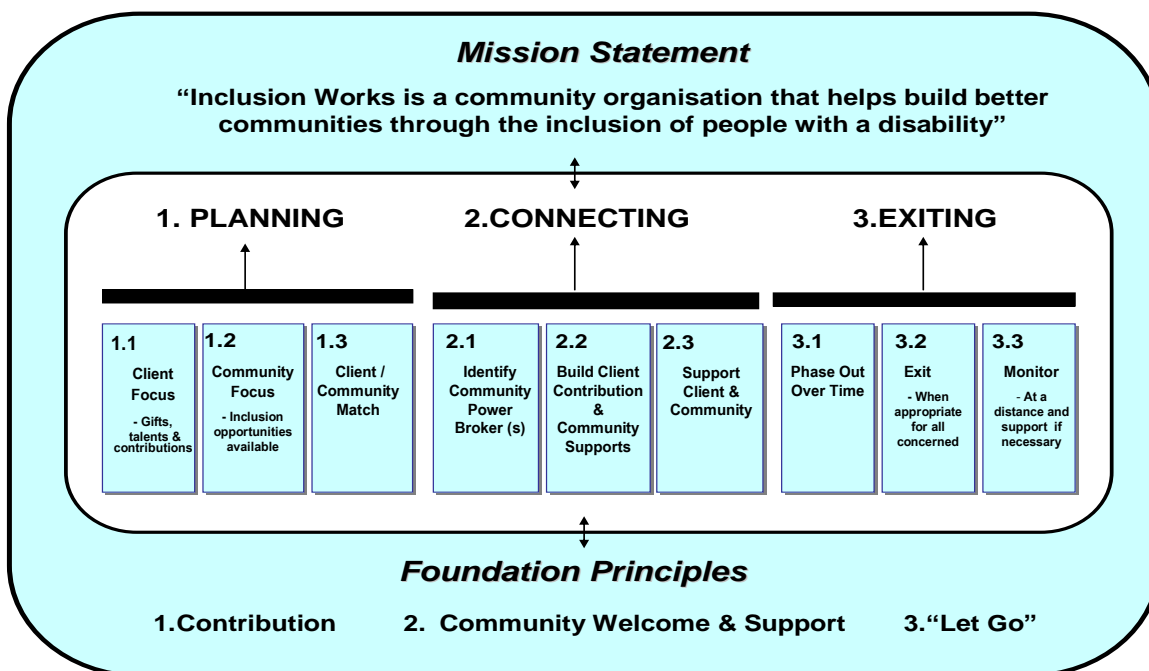
Please consider

Characteristics experienced by people who are not members of a community	Characteristics arising from community participation through leisure
Separateness from the real world	Belonging to and being part of communities
Constant boredom	Adventure and challenge
Loneliness	Companionship, increased social networks, new and stronger friendships
Dependence or total isolation	Interdependence
Restricted freedom	Freedom
Being controlled	Control and power over lifestyle
Limited growth and new challenges	Improved self image through achievement
No sense of a future	Hope and enthusiasm for a future
Feelings of failure	Achievement

Inclusion Works, having both a clear Mission and Foundation Principles, developed a model of operation that is based on the assumption that for true community inclusion to take place there is a need for planning to occur, connecting to occur and finally to lead by stepping back and 'letting go'.

In addition, within each one of these key stages, further actions were identified, as per the following chart.

### Inclusion Model



Inclusion Works operates as a community based disability service, funded by the Queensland, Government (Disability Services Queensland) and has a strong commitment to its role as a 'community building' service rather than the more traditional 'social service' model. This calls for us as a service to focus on the gifts, talents and contributions of people, to look out for and build on the opportunities that surround us, to invest in the assets of people and channel them back into the community, to build and maintain strong connection with community organisations, to build strong community partnerships, whilst empowering those people who have remained at the margins and finally, to promote and help secure the role of citizen in the lives of others. The significant difference between the 2 models of operation becomes clear when we study the following chart.

<b>Community Building Model</b>	<b>Social Service Model</b>
<b>Focus on ASSETS</b>	<b>Focus on NEEDS</b>
<b>Builds from OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>Responds to PROBLEMS</b>
<b>Investment Orientation</b>	<b>CHARITY Orientation</b>
<b>Emphasis on ASSOCIATIONS</b>	<b>Emphasis on AGENCIES</b>
<b>Focus on COMMUNITY</b>	<b>Focus on INDIVIDUALS</b>
<b>Goal is EMPOWERMENT</b>	<b>Goal is SERVICE</b>
<b>Power comes from RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>Power comes from CREDENTIALS</b>
<b>PEOPLE are the answer</b>	<b>PROGRAMS are the answer</b>
<b>People are CITIZENS</b>	<b>People are CLIENTS</b>

To best capture the true essence of how Inclusion Works both operates and impacts on the life of individuals with a disability and the wider community, please enjoy the following story:

*It was to be just another day - one of uncertainty. When one works with and alongside communities, one can be certain of uncertainty.*

*The phone rang. It was from a local Aged Care facility who sought our assistance. Rick Nelson (\*) is a young man of 30 years who resided within this facility. He lived there 24/7, owing to his significant medical needs. Rick's health was directly impacted on by a neuro-muscular condition which resulted in his health status being regarded as highly vulnerable. Rick was dependent on the use of a wheelchair, he was unable to communicate verbally, his nutrition needs were met by way of a feeding tube. His life was defined as being one of fragility. But there were some things that the staff of the nursing home were certain of, and that was that Rick had needs that the aged care facility could never meet, that being to provide a life that was relevant to a 30 year old man. Rick had something to offer, to contribute, and in so doing, to enhance further our community.*

*Ric Thompson, Coordinator of a small community building agency "Inclusion Works" agreed to look further into how Inclusion Works may be able to help Rick find his place and space.*

*Inclusion Works is located in Townsville, North Queensland, Australia. It is a strong community. Its strength, despite its transitional nature is founded in its smorgasbord of associational opportunities.*

*Townsville has a population of over 150,00 people, 31,807 families, 59 neighbourhood associations, 700 clubs, 2,712 local businesses, 46 civic groups, 52 churches and 82 ethnic organisations. Inclusion Works had identified over 1.8 million community inclusion opportunities within this community. There must be something out there, relevant to Rick's needs and interests.*

*This is a story about how Townsville became a better community as a result of Rick's involvement and membership.*

*Andrew, one of the part-time Community Development Workers and the Coordinator visited Rick. We already knew that Rick had clearly identified health needs but our mission was to help identify his unique gifts, talents and contributions and where they could best "fit" within the community and, in so doing, help build a better community. This would require a commitment to planning and serious consideration.*

*Inclusion Works believes that communities only become strong communities when we build on its assets where people are seen as citizens and producers. Inclusion Works saw Rick as an asset to the Townsville community.*

*This was not difficult as when Andrew entered into Rick's single accommodation within the aged-care facility he was greeted not just by Rick's smile but a collection of motorbike posters around his room. We knew immediately Rick's passion!*

*Andrew was not just young but an avid motorbike rider hence, quickly able to associate with Rick's passion and interest. Andrew learnt quickly the best means of communication with Rick and proceeded to seek out what a good life may look like.*

*Rick loved motorbikes. Not any motorbike but Harley Davidson motorbikes. Rick enthusiastically responded to the offer to support him in becoming more involved and a contributing member of the Townsville motorbike community.*

*Andrew investigated the options. There were five known motorbike clubs in Townsville, of which four were known to the police! There it was, the best client/community match with the*

*fifth club being the HOGS. The Harley Owners Group, a local club yet linked into an international club network.*

*Andrew looked into the club and identified “Duffy” as the best person to approach, as he was the social organiser within the club. The “power broker” the person within the club who made things happen.*

*Andrew approached Duffy and spoke of a young man who shared his passion for Harleys. A time was made. The following Sunday morning at 5.00am at Queens Gardens for it was from here that the club was leaving for a day’s motorbike run. An opportunity to meet and greet.*

*This would require a 3.00am rise for Rick. The aged-care facility made the adjustments. Rick was unable to ride on a motorbike owing to his health but he could be in the presence of the bikes that he and others loved. It was time for Andrew to go “connecting”.*

*On the morning at the Queens Gardens, with both the assistance and role modelling of Andrew the members were introduced to Rick. On their departure Rick was invited to give “the one finger salute” to send them on their way. Rick enthusiastically obliged.*

*What a success! But was it? Despite the enjoyment and immense pleasure experienced by Rick this single event had no indications of leading to any ongoing and meaningful connections with the club and its members, let alone their bikes. There was a need to look further.*

*With the help of John McKnight’s definition of community the answer lay before us. Is there an opportunity within the business sector that could provide on-going valued relationship opportunities for Rick? The answer was Orm Snell Motorbikes in Flinders St West. An approach was made by Andrew to see if it was at all possible for Rick to just “hang around” the shop. Orm said that it is more than possible, as on Saturday mornings the HOG members meet at the shop to “drink coffee and tell lies”. A fantastic opportunity for community linking.*

*So from then on each Saturday morning Rick, with the assistance (and ongoing role modelling / imitation) of Andrew, became part of the HOGS experience.*

*So for a number of months Rick’s commitment was tested and after a while he was approached to see if he wished to become a member. But how could this be possible – he didn’t own a Harley! A condition set down by the international rules of the organisation. Solution - the club negotiated a special clause within their constitution to allow it to happen. This act alone said a lot about how they regarded Rick’s passion and shared interests in Harley Davidson’s.*

*So Rick was initiated into the HOG (Townsville Chapter). He received his leather vest with colours (badges) and was fully inducted. Rick's involvement remained constant, as did Andrew's support. But it was acknowledged that as long as Inclusion Works remained present then the HOG would never truly accept responsibility for providing the support and independence that Rick required.*

*Andrew knew this, the HOG members knew this and Rick knew this. Rick felt safe amongst the HOG, the HOG members felt safe around Rick. It was time for Andrew to intentionally commence his withdrawal. And in so doing return to the community a responsibility that was once theirs.*

*So over the forthcoming months Andrew intentionally and methodically withdrew his involvement.*

*The community inclusion experience is one that requires constant review and surveillance and this was a role that the Inclusion Works Coordinator played. It had become clear that Rick had become a fully accepted member with a shared love of Harley Davidson motorbikes but had he truly met the expectations that go with membership? The HOG had taken Rick out for his birthday and returned at 3.00am! What had Rick done to reciprocate other than being a great guy and passionate member?*

*Rick was challenged and despite an initial hesitation enthusiastically invited the HOG to drinks at his place – the local aged care facility at 10.00am the following Sunday morning. The beer was bought, put on ice and over two dozen Harley Davidson motorbikes arrived making their presence known.*

*As one would expect you could hear all over the facility the sound of locking doors and blinds being closed. Rick was having a great time. There is something unique about being a 30 year old, hosting a party for a group of bikies within an aged-care facility.*

*Over time the blinds opened, the doors unlocked and a small number of frail aged residents approached the event not because of their desire for an early morning beer for they were "the original bikies". They shared their stories to an enthralled audience whilst being shown the components of the modern machine. Shared interests over-ride individual differences and prejudices.*

*Over time the members of the club became very much aware that Rick's full participation in the club was hindered by his limited communication. They sought assistance from Inclusion Works. Inclusion Works in response sought assistance from a local Speech Pathologist who recommended a particular communication aid. This electronic device comprised of a number*



*of buttons, that when pressed produced a verbal response such as, "Hello", "Thank you", "A Bundy and Coke – Please", "What bike do you ride?"*

*Rick could not afford this. The HOG made up the difference.*

*What Rick needed next was a voice to record his requests and an approach was made to Duffy.*

*There is no greater compliment than to be asked to be the voice of another. Duffy accepted with tears swelling in his eyes.*

*Rick's communication aid had two "No" buttons. When clarity was sought from Rick, he smiled broadly and invited others to discover themselves. Rick would invite people to hit the first "No". Recorded with all the necessary eloquence that goes with saying "no", Duffy had done well with a respectful and quiet "no". Rick further invited others to the second "No". The button was hit and a deeper and more determined voice from Duffy boomed reflecting a different meaning of "No" but through the utilization of other words – "Buzz Off!" or other words of a similar nature.*

*It was only a couple of months later that Rick suddenly passed away, in the presence of his mates.*

*Andrew had ceased providing direct support to both Rick and the HOG some 6 months before.*

*Andrew spoke of his loss and disappointment as Rick had so much more to give.*

*The funeral presented two days later at Morley's Funerals. The dozens of Harley Davidson Motor Bikes took their place with their riders filling the chapel. Rick's family and a few others took their place.*

*Measuring inclusion is not easy, but there are times when it is clearly evident. Duffy gave the eulogy and never once spoke of Rick's disability but spoke of his love of Harley Davidson motorbikes, Bundy and Coke and women (pretty normal for a 32 year old male!).*

*Rick's funeral procession headed off with Harley Davidson motorbikes leading.*

*A telling moment of respect!*

*The procession moved slowly through the town to the crematorium on the outskirts.*

*On arrival the garden staff whose role was to assist in the transferring of the casket, hesitated as the HOG members took the casket into the chapel where they fervently called upon Rick calling upon the traditions that were only known to them.*

*The gardeners let them be.*

*Rick passed away at age 32, twenty four months after Inclusion Works had commenced working alongside him, and 6 months after the service had fully let him go into his community, free of human service dependency but where both he and the HOG had become dependent on each other.*

*If you were to walk into Orm Snell's shop today you will come across a photo of Rick, his leather vest (with colours) and gloves. A tribute to a great mate, a member who shared their passion.*

*Communities only become strong communities when we call upon all of their assets. Townsville has become a better community as a direct result of a young man's unique gifts, talents and contributions being matched within his shared community of interest.*

Rick's story reflects clearly the foundation principles that go with successful community inclusion.

A belief that individuals with a disability have a place in community and the capacity to contribute to community. A belief that some community members (not all!!!) have the capacity to welcome and support. And finally, a belief that community inclusion occurs when we learn to 'let go'.

Rick's story also illustrates the importance of building on the passions and interests that are shared with others - of finding the right person to lead, and being prepared to do "the asking".

Rick's story helps reinforce the importance of role modelling and imitation when inviting others in, of the importance of not hanging around unnecessarily and of giving praise. Finally, the single act of 'letting go', by leading, by 'stepping back', enables individuals and groups to do something they can already do.

**Please consider!**

\* Rick Nelson welcomed, encouraged and supported the telling of his story.

Community Unity is present when:

- We focus on the gifts, talents and contributions of all citizens
- We focus on the opportunities that come from a re-defined community
- We, alongside others, help identify roles and opportunities within community where citizens can contribute and have their contribution recognized
- We step back and in doing so, allow others to step forward into the lives of those known to us.

The power and potential of community is reflected in the quote by Germaine Greer, when she said, “Everything that is, could be otherwise”.

I invite you to investigate what that otherwise may be.

Family Advocacy owns the copyright in the material contained in this document except where prior authorship is acknowledged. You may not use the material for commercial purposes without Family Advocacy’s permission.

[www.family-advocacy.com](http://www.family-advocacy.com)