

# coming together

...to create change



A National Family Leadership newsletter

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*Coming Together* is compiled and produced by the CAFL Family Leadership and Grassroots Engagement Advisory Committee to highlight the power of families to effect change and advance Inclusion.



50 years

Canadian Association for Community Living

Diversity includes.

## Sharing What is Possible

Henry Ford once said, 'Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success'. Within the community living movement 'coming together' is the very foundation upon which we are built. As family members we come together to gather strength and support from each other. From that strength and support comes confidence. Confidence that as families we can indeed work together, to move forward a collective vision for inclusive communities.

When families come together to share stories and experiences, an amazing phenomenon occurs. Dreams become possibilities; possibilities become reality. What we once saw only as a dream for our families, for our sons and daughters, becomes real and achievable. What other families have accomplished, and the way in which they have overcome various obstacles and challenges, becomes our own roadmap. If it can be done, then we can do it also. In 'coming together' we begin to see the possibilities that are open before us and we come to believe that anything is possible. Suddenly the work that lies ahead to foster safe and inclusive communities for everyone does not seem so overwhelming. A load shared is a load eased.

We all strive to be included...to feel wanted and valued...to be known! We want this for ourselves, we want this for our children, and our children want this for themselves. We must however also recognize and remind ourselves that these dreams must

match those of our sons and daughters. We must ensure that the dreams we chase are theirs... not ours. We must remind ourselves that all too often the various 'programs and services' that exist today do not enable these dreams to be realized. All too often these programs and services, although intended to help, actually get in the way of real and meaningful inclusion. We need to see beyond these 'programs' and keep focused on our dreams; and not settle for something simply because it is the only thing available. We come together to share what is possible, not to accept something simply because it is offered.

We all are looking to spend time with family and friends, to go shopping, to engage in recreation, find meaningful work, and through it all to have a sense of belonging. For some of us this journey to fulfillment is more difficult, but having the foundation of support from an inclusive community makes this struggle manageable. Having support from each other makes this possible.

We have to be brave enough to ask our communities – our schools, our workplaces, our neighbourhoods – to become more inclusive and a place where everyone feels welcomed and accepted. A strong inclusive family is the touchstone for an inclusive life but our communities must also support and share our vision. We must come together to change and shape our future – a future that has no limits; a future in which our dreams can indeed be realized.

# My Son has Attitude

Noreene Adam

When I hear the saying ‘attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference’ I think of my son Kirby. His ‘attitude’ is crystal clear – listen to me, trust me, I can do it.

As a baby, we were given that ‘never-never’ story by many health professionals. We were advised to prepare ourselves as he would always need to be taken care of. When he was about three years old, we were introduced to our local Association for Community Living in Pembroke Ontario, when Kirby was enrolled in their nursery school program. This was one of the best things to happen to our family. The enthusiastic staff at the school motivated us to start thinking about all the possible things Kirby might be able to do. I went from being a mother who felt discouraged and alone to becoming determined that my son would have every opportunity possible to grow up and be successful at whatever he wanted to do.

In those early years, I was quite happy with the supports and services available to us. I was not aware that there could be anything different. The opportunities provided by Community Living to families to attend workshops and conferences helped me to learn about new possibilities for my son. I learned a new language- inclusion, integration, inclusive education, supported employment, citizenship, real work, and choices.

As a child, Kirby’s experiences were like a yo-yo. Out in our community, we helped him take part in the same recreation activities as his brother and sister.

At school he went back and forth between regular and segregated classrooms, in our efforts to make school a good learning experience for him. However, by high school, I finally put my foot down and insisted that he be supported to actively participate in mainstream classes. By the time he was nineteen, he graduated with a modified certificate. There were a few options available to him at our local community college, mostly restaurant services classes. Kirby wanted no part in them; he told us they were ‘women’s work’ and not for him. He persisted in letting us know he had big plans- he wanted to move away from home and get a job, just as his older brother had done a few years earlier. His problem was that we were very slow in learning to listen to him. My husband and I had talked about adding on a small granny flat to our home for Kirby, so he could have his own space. It was a shock to have him let us know that he did not want to live with us. He wanted to be like his brother and move away.

Once again our local association helped out. Kirby was supported to find an apartment in Pembroke. He was thrilled at having his apartment and being close to his friends. Over the years though, apartment living was not working very well for Kirby. We helped him purchase a small house in Pembroke. Since doing this we have seen big changes in him. He has become more independent, more assertive, and less anxious. He has made many friends among his neighbours and they are very supportive of him. We are also learning to ‘let go’ and trust his decisions. We finally realized that



Kirby and mom.

this was a freedom we were not allowing him to have. It has been hard for us to do this, but now we can see that he is much happier.

Kirby is pretty happy with his life. He has made his own life now, just as his brother and sister have done.

It has been a long and bumpy road to this point. Likely there will still be surprises and more bumps in the future, but we, his family, friends, neighbours and support people have learned to work together, to listen to Kirby and to each other, and to respect all ideas. This has led to Kirby being successful in fulfilling his dream of moving away from our home, getting a job, being near his friends, and having his very own home.

Thank goodness he has ‘attitude’!

*Noreene and her family live in a small village northwest of Ottawa. She firmly believes that living some distance from where specialized services were available led her family to have Kirby included, just like his brother and sister, in all aspects of community life.*

*Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.*  
— Jane Howard