

ADVOCACY RIGHTS OPPORTUNITIES

NEWSLETTER

The Supported Life Conference

by JJ Fernandez, Acting Advocacy Coordinator

Twenty-nine individuals, including fifteen residents and fourteen support staff from Sonoma Developmental Center (Sonoma), attended the 23rd Annual Supported Life Conference, “A Meaningful Life...Are We There Yet?” on October 7–9, 2009 in Sacramento. Some attended the entire conference, while others just came for the day.

Leaving Sonoma Wednesday afternoon...

We left at about 2:30 PM and were quite excited to be on our way. Anya, who is from Malone residence, immediately called shotgun. I was the driver, and Melissa and Karen (support staff) sat in the back seat with Marcia, who is from Cohen residence.

On the way we thought of road trip games we all used to play and found ourselves differing on what radio station to listen to, but made compromises along the way. We decided to stop a couple of times for restroom breaks and soft-serve ice cream.

Arriving at the hotel...

When we arrived at the hotel, Marcia pointed out the Elephant Bar restaurant across the street from the hotel and wondered if we should eat dinner there. We all agreed that was a good idea, since Anya, Marcia, and I had eaten there last year and enjoyed the food very much.

Anya remembered that the hotel had amazing warm chocolate chip cookies that they give out when you check in and requested one for each of us.

When we arrived at our rooms, we were pleasantly surprised by how nice they were, with big comfortable beds, a desk, a nice lounge chair with ottoman, a large screen TV, spacious bathrooms, a coffee maker, and a balcony with views of a pond with ducks. We decided we would unpack and freshen up before going to dinner.

Wednesday evening...

Soon I heard a knock at my door. It was the ladies and they were ready for dinner. As we left the hotel, Anya bumped into an old high school friend from Southern California who was up for the conference. She chatted with him for a while and then we walked over to the Elephant Bar for dinner.

When we looked at the menu, we were delighted with the plentiful choices. Marcia ordered steak; Karen ordered sliders; and Melissa, Anya and I all ordered sushi rolls with oriental soup on the side. Everything was delicious and we were so full from the meal that we decided to skip dessert and head back to the hotel for the 16th Annual Inclusion Celebration Dessert Social.

The Inclusion Celebration recognizes outstanding role models who make a difference for individuals striving to belong to inclusive communities. During the awards event, we were treated to coffee, punch, tea and a scrumptious assortment of desserts.

One of the award recipients was Dana Faletti with Supported Life Institute. It was wonderful to see Dana get this award for all her hard work in helping coordinate this event every year. Dana is the

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Marcia in her hotel room

person that I speak to when registering all the attendees from the Center for both the Supported Life and People First conferences. Dana's kindness, understanding, patience and professionalism made it easy to see why she was given an award. Jerry Corradi, Clients' Rights Advocate from Area Board 4 and who works at Sonoma, was also a part of the planning team at this year's conference. By the time the Dessert Social was over, we were all tired from the long day and made our way back to our rooms and looked forward to what the next day would bring.

Thursday...

The first thing I remember hearing is, "Is JJ up now?" It was Marcia's voice in the room next door and it was 5:00 in the morning. Next came the phone call and we decided to hit the gym. While Melissa and I each jumped on a treadmill, Marcia decided to do some arm stretches in front of the mirror. She was pretty excited about her workout and after about half an hour, decided she had had enough and was ready for breakfast. We got a call from Karen and Anya, who were just getting up. We decided we would all meet at 8 AM and head down for breakfast.



L to R: Albert, Bobby, Stephen and Rina



Marcia & Anya look over the raffle prizes

Before the conference sessions started, we listened to the welcoming keynote address, entitled "The Disability Industrial Complex: Ending Segregation of People with Disabilities" by Dale Dileo, from the Training Resource Network, Inc. During the presentation many more individuals from Sonoma arrived just in time for coffee and muffins and to listen to the keynote address. They included Bobby from Judah residence, Dennis from Roadruck residence, Hon from Cedars residence, Steven, Jimmy and Mark from Corcoran residence, Janine from Bentley residence, and Chris from Malone residence and their support

staff, Albert P., Alfredo Z., Albert C., Theresa A., Rina D., Rachael C., Becky M., Ross A., and Alfredo V.

After the keynote address, the concurrent sessions began and ran throughout the morning and into the early evening, with such topics as; "Relationships: It's as easy as 1, 2, 3"; "Building Community Connections"; "Work Incentives 101; Living and Working in the Community"; "Healthy Me! Healthy You! A Pilot Wellness Program"; "Ideas to Action: Self-Advocates Using THINK-PLAN-DO"; and "Spirituality: Supporting Believing, Belonging, and Becoming."

Many of us attended the morning session entitled "FOCUS Film Festival" by Mary Ann Weston, introduced by Far Northern Regional Center. The session highlighted films that explore the complexity of human experience between people with disabilities and the broader community, and remind us that we are more alike than different. It was a rather powerful presentation.

The luncheon keynote address was called, "Living the Life You Will Be Proud to Leave" by Bill Gaventa from the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities. The lunch was quite delicious, with some people getting seconds.

In the afternoon, some of us attended a session called "Feeling Safe, Being Safe: Emergency Preparedness Train-the-Trainer Project," presented by Mark Starford, of the Board Resource Center



Safety handouts

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and Carol Risley, Chief of the Office of Human Rights and Advocacy Services from the Department of Developmental Services. We learned how to be prepared and to make our own emergency to-go kits. We were given a DVD and training notebook.

We also attended a session called “Work Incentives 301: Plans for Self Support, a Funding Option,” presented by Molly Sullivan of Griffin-Hammis Associates. She talked about people with disabilities having concerns about working and losing access to critical benefits. She provided detailed information about work incentives that allow a person to maintain health insurance and eligibility for cash benefits. She talked about Social Security work incentives like “Plan for Achieving Self-Support” or PASS, which can help pay for work-related expenses, and provided examples of how people have successfully used PASS to reach their work goal.

During the day there was also an exhibit room with the latest technology products and services, including assistive technology; curricula and videos for staff training; supported vacations (which Marcia said she was familiar with); communication devices; accessible vehicles and homes; and much more. They were also having a raffle and a chance to win other prizes by visiting participating exhibitor tables and having them stamp your quest card in the registration packet. The ladies, including Marcia and Anya, decided they wanted to head over to the Arden Mall for a bit and do some shopping with some of their hard-earned money. Both of the ladies work for Sunrise Industries: Marcia works at Agilent Technologies in Santa Rosa, and Anya works as a secretary for Sunrise Industries in Eldridge.



Marcia & Karen dance

Later in the evening we attended a reception and information fair with light refreshments, snacks and a no-host bar. Anya reconnected with some old friends from Southern California and others she had met at last year’s conference. There was an emcee who played music and announced the winners of the raffle and stamped quest cards. Sonoma walked away with a few prizes: Marcia won a cake platter with cookies on it and a backpack, shirt and hat from Trips Inc., and Karen won a Wii System.

Once the dancing started there was no stopping Marcia, who got up and boogied the night away. We were all pretty exhausted from all the day’s events and decided to kick back in the room to relax and re-energize for the following day.

Friday...

I heard the voice again around 5 AM asking “Is JJ going to go to the gym with us again?” It was Marcia and she was ready to start the day. It was pretty much a repeat performance at the gym, however Marcia decided to expand her exercise routine on the exercise ball, which she found rather amusing. We soon heard from Anya and Karen and decided we would all have breakfast together in the hotel restaurant and then head back to our rooms and pack, before attending the concurrent sessions.

As we took our luggage to the car and checked out of the room, there was a sense of mixed emotions. We knew our time here was coming to an end, but at the same time, looked forward to going home and telling everyone about our experiences at the conference. Around this time the rest of the gang from Sonoma arrived for the day, including David, Mark, Amber and Leslie from Brent residence, and Liguori from Malone residence and their support staff, Kerri, Steve and Alfredo V.



Presenter Molly Sullivan (L) chats with audience members



Amber (L) and Kerri

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The concurrent sessions were about to begin, including, “Living Beyond Boundaries”; “Family Support for the Real World”; “Scary Budget Times: What Will Happen to My IPP Rights”; “Communications: It Works Both Ways”; “How To Access Affordable Housing”; and “Dual Diagnosis and a Meaningful Life.”

We decided to attend “Above the Belt: Honoring the Need for Love and Relationships,” presented by Dave Hingsburger from Vita Community Living Services. The presentation included looking at some of the fundamentals in ensuring that people with disabilities are able to establish meaningful relationships—from friendships to loving partnerships. It was a two-part session that focused on teaching an individual how to make good decisions and how to avoid bad ones.

We were happy to hear that it was time for lunch. We sat down to enjoy another delicious meal that included a wonderful salad, and a main course with an Asian flair, including teriyaki chicken, egg rolls, steamed vegetables and rice, and a tasty dessert. The keynote address and conference finale was called “Self Advocacy: The Our of Power” by David Hingsburger from Vita Community Living Services.

By this time Marcia and Anya were ready to head back home. As we left the hotel we said goodbye to many of the people we had met during our stay and looked forward to seeing them again next year. As we walked out of the hotel Anya thanked the concierge and told him, “We’ll see you in June.” She was already preparing for the People First Conference. For Anya, the best part of the trip was, “Seeing my old friends,” and for Marcia it was, “Winning the prizes and telling people about my job.”



Melissa (L) and Marcia (R) with some of Marcia's prizes

Returning to Sonoma Friday afternoon...



Standing: Karen, JJ, Anya and Melissa; seated: Marcia

The ride home was much quieter than it was on the way up. I guess we were all a little bit tired from the busy last couple of days. We arrived on campus around 4:00 PM and unloaded the car. Everyone seemed happy to be back, and Anya and Marcia's roommates and staff were happy to see them as well. During the next couple of advocacy group meetings, the clients who attended the conference enjoyed talking about their experiences and looked forward to next year. Marcia was already talking about what she would be packing for next year's trip, and Anya was calling shotgun for the People First trip in June.

This trip wouldn't have been possible without the assistance of so many people from Sonoma, the Supported Life Institute staff, and the wonderful employees of the Doubletree Hotel who frequently checked with us to ask if everything was okay. Special thanks to Melissa and Karen and the other Sonoma staff who attended the conference with the residents. And to the residents of Sonoma who voiced an interest in attending the conference: *Self-Advocacy works—keep speaking out!!*

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