

MAKING a DIFFERENCE

REAL HOMES. REAL CAREERS. REAL LEARNING. REAL INFLUENCE. REAL SUPPORTS.

FIRST
Comes Love
THEN
Comes Marriage



**NEWS
FOR YOU:**

LOVE & MARRIAGE: Disabilities & Relationships

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Reflecting on the General Assembly

DISABILITY DAY: Annual Rally Reaches its 15th Milestone

GCDD
GEORGIA COUNCIL ON
DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

On the Cover:

Jamie and Michael Teal, a married couple of 17 years, featured in the "First Comes Love Then Comes Marriage" article, outside of their home in Athens, GA.

The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities, a federally funded state agency, works to bring about social and policy changes that promote opportunities for persons with developmental disabilities and their families to live, learn, work, play and worship in Georgia communities.



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MAKING a DIFFERENCE

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REAL COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

Learning Journeys Spark and Promote Connections

Learning journeys are a key piece of the purposeful learning process for Real Communities. The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) believes it is vital to create opportunities to support individuals to travel to other places, learn about different approaches and consider how we might apply that learning to our work in Georgia. We find that when we get people away from the day-to-day grind and take part in an immersive and experiential learning process, people are able to open themselves up and see new possibilities.

This past October, I had the privilege of taking part in an eight-day learning journey to the Midwest with colleagues and friends who are exploring inclusion and community-building in their local communities. My friend and partner in community-building, April Doner, a talented photojournalist, storyteller and a current fellow of the ABCD Institute, accompanied me on our learning journey. Over the course of our trip, April was constantly documenting our time with her camera and writing in her notebook. She has an incredible gift that she enjoys sharing, and I invited her to tell about our adventures, meeting some of the people who welcomed us into their homes and communities and share the entire story of that trip with all of you here in Georgia.

- Caitlin Childs, GCDD Organizing Director, Real Communities Initiative

welcoming community. We were also joined by Caitlin Childs of the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities, Kirk Hinkleman (CA) with Lifeworks Supported Living, Anne Mitchell of Tesseract Learning and Sheldon Schwitek of the Center for Positive Living Support.

“Hearing their stories made me realize the challenges that families, people labeled as “disabled” and communities face in creating a welcoming, respectful place for folks with this label in community life. I also realized the joy when those challenges are overcome.”

My background is in neighborhood community-building in the tradition of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), and I have been practicing ABCD here for about six years. While “inclusion” is always a major focus of ABCD, Toronto marked my first in-depth exposure to the growing network of folks doing

This October, I was among a crew of people to undertake a weeklong “learning journey” throughout the Midwest, visiting people who were pioneering exciting grassroots, citizen-led change in their communities.

Accompanying me were Anna and Amara, artists and neighbors in the Village of the Arts neighborhood in Bradenton, FL, who are trying out ways to create a more connected,

Road trip to Cincinnati



Meeting with the Starfire Council at the Red Tree



Joseph, Tara and Tina
connecting in a coffee shop

Lunch with Mike and Kirk

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It was fitting that we began with a simple social gathering, because as the journey continued, we all began to realize a core truth:

ALL SIGNIFICANT CHANGE BEGINS AND ENDS WITH CONVERSATION, RELATIONSHIP, AND AUTHENTIC CARING BETWEEN PEOPLE.

.....

amazing things around inclusion for people with disabilities. Hearing their stories made me realize the challenges that families, people labeled as “disabled” and communities face in creating a welcoming, respectful place for folks with this label in community life. I also realized the joy when those challenges are overcome. This journey opened my eyes even more.

My companions and I also learned about the core principles behind truly creative social innovation and impact. We learned that real, sustainable change starts with conversation and relationships, and in continuing those two things. It also lies in each of us developing some solid personal habits and orientations toward curiosity, regular reflection and an openness to adventure and encountering the unexpected, unpredictable and unknown.

The journey began at the beautiful home of Anne Mitchell and her husband Chuck. Anne was the host and behind-the-scenes coordinator of our learning journey. She is an incredible woman with a fierce, inquisitive and experimental spirit. At her home, we came to appreciate her love for her two dogs and her stellar talent for aesthetic gardening. Together with De’Amon Harges, Anne runs Tesseract Learning, a teaching and consulting company that empowers people to build community and influence their environment wherever they are.

It was fitting that we began with a simple social gathering, because as the journey continued, we all began to realize a core truth: all significant change begins and ends with conversation, relationship and authentic caring between people.

Stop #1: Cincinnati, Starfire Council

Our “Cincy” visit was hosted by the wonderful folks at Starfire Council, a person-centered organization focusing on building inclusive lives and communities. We started at the Red Tree Gallery, where we met the Starfire team and a young woman named Melissa.

“My companions and I also learned about the core principles behind truly creative social innovation and impact. We learned that real, sustainable change starts with conversation and relationships and in continuing those two things.”

I was impressed with Director Tim Vogt’s description of how Starfire has evolved from a service orientation to a person-centered approach that focuses on building connections and relationships in which people with disabilities enjoy reciprocal, satisfying relationships in their community and can act on their passions. Starfire members, family and now anyone from the community are encouraged to take on a capstone project as a way to take action around something they love to do or care about.

Melissa told us about her project, which involved selling her baked goods. But, Tim told me later, her baking is just part of her capstone project. She is working on developing an after-party for the 5K that’s held in her neighborhood of Saylor

Park, and she and a group of other bakers are going to collaborate on the treats for it leading up to the party.

Starfire has also found innovative ways to encourage members, members’ families and local citizens to begin expanding their web of relationships locally through learning conversations. Individuals are encouraged to have coffee or a meal and learn about each others’ lives, talents and passions. Starfire then hosts gatherings for people to share what they have learned.

We then went to another coffee shop and met with Joseph, a Starfire member, and Tina Manchise and Tara Lindsey Gordon, founders of the Emery Theatre Requiem Project.

Through Starfire, Joseph made a connection earlier this year with Northside Slow Ride, a group of biking enthusiasts who meet every Thursday. From there, Joseph was inspired to create Streetfilms Fest, which Emery was happy to host.

Tina and Tara have partnered with Starfire on several great community events over the last year. The two groups have found a common passion for community and including people in the margins as leaders and artists to be celebrated.

After exploring Emery, we had lunch with Mike Holmes. Through Starfire, Mike has connected with his passion for sports and now coaches girl’s basketball for the Cincy Swish.

To read April Doner’s full learning journey blog and view her photographs, visit www.gcdd.org/blogs/gcdd-spotlight/2459-learning-journeys-spark-and-promote-connections-.html.