

BRIDGES-OVER-BARRIERS

TELLING OUR STORIES • • • • •

• • • • • SHARING OUR EXPERIENCE

Trained Communication Assistants Needed!

Through our video, books and other publications, and now our Song of Hope, we are making people more aware of our rights and abilities as communicators. People of all ages are feeling hopeful and wanting advice about how they may try Supported Typing to express their thoughts and feelings, learn about their options, and make their own choices. We see two aspects in helping people express their thoughts reliably:

1. An experienced **communication facilitator** meets with someone who is interested in using Supported Typing to assess their communication needs and strengths. Based on what they find, they encourage the person to type in the way that works for them, recommend communication devices, and advise and motivate key people in the person's life to provide emotional and physical support. A facilitator may also help a communicator to make progress towards more independent typing, while providing enough support for hard times or the expression of deep thoughts. Bridges is lucky in Judi and Beth who have such experience.
2. People already in a non-speaking person's life or others interested in helping can be trained to continue supportive relationships so that the person can use Supported Typing regularly for everyday interactions as well as deeper thoughts. For this kind of support, we urgently need trained **communication assistants** in Ontario!

We are fortunate in our Bridges allies—notably for this goal Barbara Collier of Augmentative Communication Community Partnerships CANADA (ACCPC). Please visit www.accpc.ca for more about how human rights legislation can be applied by people who need communication support at http://www.communication-access.org/p/rights_expectations and <http://www.communication-access.org> for more about communication access resources.

Andrew's invitation:

Bridges means getting together with friends who communicate our way and sharing our thoughts, struggles and strategies. We are there for each other.

For me, Bridges also means speaking up for others who do not yet have ways to speak and make real choices, and to be listened to, respected and included.

I want an action plan for the future. I think Bridges needs a life plan like we have for ourselves. I would like the Bridges centre to be real. We will be here to offer a safe place for more people to talk and share. I think Bridges will become very big. If we can show that communicating our way is real, it will help us all.

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News from Tim

Tim was one of our founding members in early 2004. We miss his presence since he moved to Antigonish, Nova Scotia, nearly three years ago. We know he misses us too. We are delighted to keep in touch through bulletins sent by Tim and his mother Betty. It's wonderful that Bridges members John MD and Joey have visited Tim's new home with their families.

In spring 2012, Tim became the owner of his very own Ford Ranger truck! With his friend Kristen, Tim helps out in volunteer ways around the community. They help with new garden boxes at L'Arche, and at the woodery and a local nursery. Tim is a strong porter. He says he likes his truck and hopes he can do useful things with it in the community. Betty notes that work with his truck will make summer and fall a fuller time for Tim. In such a small town he is soon connected through friends to others who are happy to meet him in this way. Tim also has a circle of friends and is in touch with Martha Leary in Halifax.

In summer 2011 Tim, with Betty and Kristen, attended **The Summer Institute: Finding a Voice, Finding a Place, Finding a Purpose** organized by The Institute on Communication and Inclusion at the MIT Media Lab, Cambridge, MA in July 2011. Betty writes: *The trip was a huge challenge, but definitely worth it. Tim kept saying 'I need to go home but I'm glad we came'. After 17 years of being Tim's main facilitator, I know now that I have strayed a long way from "best practices" in FC. We will now set to work to undo my bad habits, and to move Tim toward independence in typing. Kristen is now on board, and Tim says she will be very good, which is good news for all of us. The training workshops were excellent, and it was interesting to see how far things have come since the 1990s.*

We all attended, among other things, a very interesting session on using rhythm to improve overall movement and to work toward independence in typing. It was given by Marilyn Chadwick. Of course we attended Martha and Anne Donnellan's session on Getting Unstuck and Moving On. Tim loves to listen to those two! We saw people who had been at the Syracuse workshops in the 90s; the folks using FC looking much more mature, and their parents looking and feeling somewhat more ancient. We also were very happy to see Rodney from Australia (who visited Guelph in 2007).

Among the happiest times were the evening swims at the hotel. For 3 nights the only people in the pool were either autistic or supporting someone who was autistic. (Though the pool was open to any guest in the hotel.) The swimmers, who ranged in age from 49 to 8 were joyful, and the parents in and around the pool were relaxed and happy. A very unique "public" event!

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News from Tim continued...

*We too appreciated **A New Kind of Listening**, and also **Wretches and Jabberers**. Harvey Lavoy, who is Tracy's facilitator in that film, (and for some 10 years of Tracy's life), was the instructor in the advanced class at the conference. He is severe, but very good! The whole thrust at all levels, from beginners, (where Tim was helping Kristen) to advanced, where people had been using ST for years, was moving toward independence. Many of the young men whom we met in Syracuse long ago are now very close to independence, needing only a touch at the elbow or shoulder. Kristen, by moving from least to most support, found that she and Tim can type with support at the elbow. Clearly I have been giving him too much support all these years! Support at the hand is a no-no. The communicator's focus on the keyboard is essential, and one is told to stop all activity if that focus wanders. (Fading support back is not started until the speaker can type for some minutes without being reminded to look.)*

We are to move to "over the arm" support instead of "under the arm" as soon as possible, and work on the speaker pulling his own hand back by having him touch his chest, or a dot on the table, between selections. It is in the moments when the speaker is in a focused rhythm that fading support works best. Tim and I have found my mother's old metronome, (literally 100 years old!) a great help. Martha came down for a day a while ago and helped Kristen and me with Tim's rhythm and other things. Kristen and Tim are doing very well.

"I am more like you than not"

From the soundtrack of the documentary "Wretches and Jabberers." Written by J. Ralph inspired by the words of Tracy Thresher and Larry Bissonnette

I'm bouncing around the system as it's trying to figure me out.

I just want someone to risk it and hear what I have to say.

I am not a victim just got a real story to tell.

I can't speak but I need you to listen.

I'm more like you than not like you.

I'm more like you then you'll ever know.

I hurt like you and cry like you.

I'm more like you, wouldn't you like to know?

Not with a bang but a whisper, all the foundations fell.

As the old guards protested, I armed them with a smile.

I was there when it happened as they washed their faces clean.

It's only fair, I need to be counted.

I'm more like you than not like you.

I'm more like you than you'll ever know.

I hurt like you and cry like you.

I'm more like you, wouldn't you like to know?

Don't believe your eyes. What you see is not real.

Please do not deny. I will be revealed.

I'm more like you than not like you.

I'm more like you than you'll ever know.

I laugh like you and cry like you.

I fight so hard everyday to let you know

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What we have learned in our Bridges-Over-Barriers for the past eight years we want to share to help other people who do not yet have “voices” to express their thoughts, feelings and choices.

The first task in making a difference is telling everyone about Bridges-Over-Barriers and Supported Typing. We began this powerfully in our video and book *In Our Own Words* which we published in late 2010. Bridges members could give copies to all their friends and supporters. Some allies have made possible showings of the video to various other groups. **Events were hosted in Toronto by Haadd and the Options program of Family Service Toronto, and another by the School of Social Work at McMaster University, Hamilton.** Several Bridges members and supporters attended these showings, explaining Bridges and answering questions. Matt and his mother and a circle member represented Bridges at the two Toronto events and Sara and Kevin R with Judy and Ken at McMaster.

Sara reported: *“The visit to McMaster was fun. We sat up on the stage and answered the students’ questions. It felt very good to share the Bridges movie. They all seemed to enjoy it.”*

This was Matt’s message: *Being the Man I Was Born To Be:*
Good afternoon. My name is Matt Macdonald, thank you for being here.

I am 34 years old and living with the Autism Spectrum Disorder. I live in my own apartment with the support of an amazing mother and a wonderful team of staff and circle members who help me to reach my dreams. My mother helped me to find an apartment and the right people to help me live my life. The relationship I have with my family, team and circle members makes me feel safe and free to be the man I was born to be.

What works best in my life and keeps me moving forward are the people I am surrounded by. They help me to see the beauty of the world and give me reason to keep going. My goal in life is to be able to speak with my mouth. The people in my life are doing everything to make this come true.

There is hope for everyone, and I have hope for you to reach your dreams. If you’re ever feeling lost or sad, remember to try to see the beauty in your life so you can live a happy and long life. Thank you for your attention to my story.

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Bridges-Over-Barriers Gatherings

Since we last printed a newsletter in July 2011, we have hosted seven gatherings, bringing the total to over 65! Bridges means getting together with friends who communicate our way and sharing our news, thoughts, struggles and strategies. We usually also have some kind of special focus.

July 2011: We shared several stories: Ken's Farm Story and John MD's trip to Nova Scotia, and a letter from Betty and Tim about attending the special Supported Typing event in Cambridge Massachusetts. Susan led us in special Yoga and played a guided meditation "Nature's Artist" from "The Peace Within". We painted how we see ourselves for The Bridges Mural.

August 2011: We viewed the video *A New Kind of Listening*, a documentary that takes viewers inside the creative work of the Community Inclusive Theater Group of North Carolina, as director Richard Reho works with cast members, some with disabilities, to be writers, actors and dancers in an original collaborative performance. Together they prove that a small community arts project has the power to transform lives.

September 2011: Lea shared lessons from her study of herbalism, especially connecting with plants and stilling our minds so that we can better access any information that plants have to offer us. Inner Vision is the means by which we get communication from other realms. They can come to us in the form of dreams, visions, intuitions and symbols.

October 2011: Communication in film and print and launching Andrew's new book, *Bridges over barriers in my life with autism*. See more at this link: <http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/AB-2011-blurb.pdf>

Discussion of how our supporters accept our way of communicating and help us to express ourselves:

- What good experiences have we had in getting all our team or circle to accept S-T?
- What difficulties have we experienced in trying to get everyone to accept and help us with S-T?
- What activities or settings may help people in our lives to accept and help us with S-T?
- If I have several support people using S-T, do I find that I relate to various people differently?
- Has my S-T experience with members of my team helped me to be less physically dependent?

November 2011: Viewing *Wretches and Jabberers* for an hour and thinking about these questions:

- What happens? What is the story line of the film?
- What do I see is the film's main message? How does it compare with the Bridges message?
- What do we notice about how the main characters communicate—what are their techniques?

March 2012: After our winter break, we need more time to share what's new in each of our lives. Sara, Kevin R and Sara told us about speaking up for Bridges at McMaster University with the DVD on January 30. Sharing my thoughts and hopes about the future of Bridges—who, where and how we will be in ten years.

April 2012: Focus on Music and Rhythm. Judi played the melody for the Bridges Song of Hope and explained how rhythm increases the fluency of all communication. Neurologic Music Therapy (NMT) is an advanced form of music therapy that uses music and rhythm to help with speech, physical movement, cognition and other conditions of the nervous system. Judi led us in a rhythm exercise. Sara and Matt had brought some favourite music to share and talk about. Sara chose "Won't you stand up?" and Matt "Won't Back Down".

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Andrew's Column

Bridges-Over-Barriers has become my passion. I am so proud of us all and happy that we continue to reach new people. Here are some of the things I am concerned with now.

In 2011, we published my autobiography, *Bridges over barriers in my life with autism*. It was a labour of love and some pain. It is all in my words from my mind. I enjoyed the composing with Beth who has collaborated in my use of Supported Typing since 2000. Judi also provided support when I edited the chapters and composed many of the 54 poems. My friend David DeVidi wrote the foreword. It was the first time I had been able to talk about some of the very hard times in my life and I am so glad I did. More than half the book was about hopeful things I have helped to pioneer including Bridges-Over-Barriers. All proceeds from selling my book are for realizing the Bridges Dream. Friends also give donations for this fund.

In the introduction I mention the various kinds of people who could find the book helpful. I hope my friends like the book and are inspired to tell their own stories too. It is a task that requires hard work, a good memory, a parent who can fill in gaps when you are fuzzy, and a skilled facilitator whom you trust. I am happy to have friends I can share my book with. It will help them understand me and maybe themselves as well. I don't think I am much different from others.

Because of my book and our Bridges book and dvd, I was invited to compose an article for the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*. The article is now posted online at <http://cjds.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/cjds/article/view/46/53> It is free to read but you have to register. A clip from the Bridges video can be seen at <http://youtu.be/dfAzT2vib1Y>. CJDS is edited by Dr Jay Dolmage.

I have been expressing my dreams for Bridges in paint and poems. I asked each of us to choose the way we wanted to appear on a mural of the Bridge. Most of us had a painting party at my home in July 2011. This was my original idea--to paint a mural of a bridge and friends joining on it with big splashes of water making a song of hope. The words would splash up. I painted the footbridge by my home. I like green and blue and golden light. The big willows by river show the strength of ourselves like a strong tree. I like the idea of bridge going some place. To the world and all the people. I like the thoughts of hope and joy splashing up to touch us. I like green to surround it. I want water to be the focus.

Andrew's Bridges

is my new blog at <http://andrewsbridges.blogspot.com/>.

I like this idea and the way it looks. It may inspire other people to enjoy running and gardening and also to type what they think and feel. The blog is a great way for my Bridges friends to find out what is happening in my good life. It could help others and is also a way to share my own blessings and remember how happy and I am to be me. Lea is helping me to make it a very special place to share things that are important to me.

Pages are:

*Who Am I? About Myself
Aroha: Circles of friends and legal entities of personal support.*

*Bridges-Over-Barriers: my community of self-advocates
Green Man: my passion for gardening and caring for our environment.*

*Host in My Own Home: how my housing trust helps me.
Supported decision-making;
Poetry, Music and Art: How I express thoughts & feelings.*

*Health and Fitness
Neighbourhood and Community*

Lifelong Learning

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Andrew's Column continued

To build our sense of community with one another and new allies, I composed a Song of Hope for Bridges which has been set to music by Leah, a musician friend of Bridges. We hope to learn to sing it together! Music and rhythm are known to stimulate communication of all kinds. We may even produce a DVD of the process of composing and singing this song.

Our friend Christine Zorn who made the Bridges video with us is inspired to produce a short dramatic film about living with autism, with the title *Holding in the Storm* . This is her message to us:

I am thrilled to inform you about a short film I am producing with my good friend Deirdre. Our short film is inspired by 'In Our Own Words'. Where your video is a documentary, this film is a story portrayed by actors. The main character has autism and cannot communicate with spoken words. We hear his words through his thoughts. His thoughts are inspired by your words, your spirit, and your collective vision. We thank you for your inspiration.

Our goal is to open the minds of viewers. We want them to gain a better understanding of the barriers you face, and to realize that you have feelings, are intelligent, have much to give, and that you want to be accepted and included.

We plan to finish the film by late summer of next year and we look forward to previewing it with you all. Perhaps we'll have a chance to meet before then. Some of you may have questions. Please contact me by email at christine@panvideo.com and I'd be happy to answer back.

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Song of Hope for Bridges

We are many and we are one.
The bridges that connect us are
our minds and bodies,
that others sometimes
find hard to accept.

Together we find acceptance.
Together we find hope.
Together we find community.

We are many and we are one.
The bridges that connect us are
our words and our feelings,
though they flow
from our fingertips
and not our lips.

Together we find acceptance.
Together we find hope.
Together we find community.

We are many and we are one
The bridges that connect us are
our family and friends,
who facilitate our interactions
with each other and the world.

Together we are acceptance.
Together we are hope.
Together we are community.
AB, 3 Nov 2010

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Progress Report to Guelph Services for the Autistic to December 2011

Six years ago, GSA agreed to shelter the communication support group that had evolved during the previous two years. This has meant receiving and writing official receipts for donations to support Bridges, disbursing funds, publishing and distributing Bridges materials, and sheltering Bridges gatherings in GSA's general liability insurance policy.

Central to Bridges-Over-Barriers are its regular gatherings, usually monthly except for Dec, Jan and Feb. Up to 12 communicators with family members and other supporters travel from various parts of southern Ontario and usually meet in the CMHA board room at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph. The day includes two 90-minute sessions when everyone else is quiet and the communicators have the floor. They share what they want to, including struggles and strategies. There is a break for lunch, a hike and informal social time. Each gathering usually has a focus on some learning experience--such as music, yoga, painting, opening senses to nature, spirituality, and learning about how other groups interact. At the November 2011 gathering, for example, we viewed the highly regarded film *Wretches and Gatherers* about the travels of two US men who use Supported Typing to Japan and Finland for events about alternative communication by people with autism. Between gatherings, we try to keep in touch by email. Andrew has started a new blog, Andrew's Bridges. Several members and friends are on Facebook.

Bridges has reached out to speech-language professionals, social workers, teachers, disability advocates and music therapists in Ontario and more widely. They are impressed by the potential for helping more people who have not yet found their voices. Bridges needs to inspire and train more communication assistants and evolve into a virtual Bridges centre and network.

Special projects have used some of the funds given by friends and helped Bridges to grow:

1. Creation of the Bridges DVD with our film-maker friend Christine Zorn over three years and publishing this with a companion book in November 2010. The DVD has featured in three public film events and more are being planned. Praise has come in from all over the world.
2. Individuals and their families have applied for Bridges grants to develop their alternative communication skills, their applications screened by trustees Susan Honeyman and Andrew Foster. Four individual grants have been administered.
3. Andrew Bloomfield composed his autobiography to benefit Bridges, and it was published in October 2011. All Bridges publications are legally registered for copyright with Library and Archives Canada and "Bridges-Over-Barriers" is now a registered trademark.
4. An early project to streamline and record S-T conversations and facilitate virtual gatherings has been put on hold. One factor is the variable levels of communication among the group; another is the increased diversity of devices and operating systems. So assistants continue to write down what is said and read it out, except for the few devices with voice output.

How to reach us:

Postmail: Bridges-Over-Barriers, c/o GSA, 16 Caribou Cres, Guelph, ON N1E 1C9.

Please make donations payable to GSA, with "Bridges" on the subject line. Tax-creditable receipts are issued for donations.

Webpage: <http://www.uoquelfh.ca/oaar/bridges.shtml> Email contact: ebloomfi@uoquelfh.ca