

Bridges-Over-Barriers Bulletin, December 2014

Greetings everyone!

It's been a while since we printed a Bridges bulletin, though we are often in touch by email. We want to bring you up to date and share some ideas for helping Bridges to grow. Bridges is so precious, both for the friends we have made as we share our struggles and strategies and for our dream of offering hope to people who don't have a reliable way to express themselves.

It is nearly eleven years since we started to meet in Guelph as a group of self-advocates with our supporters and friends. The first time was with Tim, Joey and Beth who came by train from Toronto to Guelph. Typing to talk is our most reliable mode of communication. We have hosted 90 gatherings during these years, usually every month except in deep midwinter.

Some Bridges highlights of our years together:

- Meeting at the Ignatius Centre of Guelph and hiking over its grounds many times over seven years.
- Sharing values, communication technology ideas and innovations in life planning.
- Being adopted by Guelph Services for the Autistic so donations could be accepted and grants made.
- Enabling eight of our members to get special communication assessments or training.
- Encouraging Judi Henry, one of our facilitators and a Trainer of Trainers, to qualify as a Master Trainer of Supported Typing.
- Making a documentary film and book about ourselves—*In Our Own Words*—launched in November 2010 and shared around the world.
- Connecting with others who use or advocate Supported Typing around the world.

Achievements of 2014:

- Inspiring the dramatic film, *Holding in the Storm: my life with autism*, made by hipjoint films and launched in Guelph in March, and winner of awards at the Columbus and Bakersfield film festivals.
- Making possible the attendance of three Bridges members—Naomi, Kevin R, Stephen-- with their supporters at the Summer Institute at Syracuse University in July.
- Hosting Tim (with Betty and Kristen) from Antigonish, Nova Scotia to a special Bridges gathering in August.
- Our first gathering outside Guelph, in Cayuga in September, hosted by Judi and other “friends from the south”)
- Welcoming visit to GTA of director and stars of *Wretches and Jabberers* in October.
- Continuing to speak up for our fundamental human rights of communication.
- Experimenting with ClickMeeting programs for virtual Bridges gatherings.

See inside: page 2--New ideas for Bridges-Over-Barriers; page 3—News from other Bridges members; page 4—Kevin Vasey shares two poems; page 5—Call for new communication assistants and Film News; page 6: Our right to communicate and make decisions about our own lives.

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New Ideas for Bridges-Over-Barriers to uphold the communication rights of everyone, especially those of us who cannot speak with our voices.

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

Bridges also means speaking up for others who do not yet have ways to speak and make real choices or 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 way 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.

Bridges is more than our regular gatherings, important as they are. We have so much to do to reach others like us in Ontario, then the world! We think of offering and encouraging more ways of keeping in touch with one another and improving our communication skills, and also sharing our Bridges message with many more people.

Our vision of a Bridges centre of communication and life planning is inspiring. As well as planning physical meetings, we can imagine Bridges as a virtual centre—living and growing and connecting. We have been happy to get to know Bridges friends through hosting gatherings all these years. But we also want to ensure that Bridges can carry on and flourish without depending a lot on the Bloomfields. Long-distance travel can mean too much stress or cost for some of us.

Here are some ideas:

- Become expert with ClickMeeting or other programs to keep in touch more often and better, especially with friends who live far away when it is hard or expensive to travel. We could use ClickMeeting to show Supported Typing to new communicators and supporters.
- Hold big Bridges gatherings less frequently, making a real success of one or two a year. Perhaps the next could be at the U of G in May. Future large gatherings could be in other places besides Guelph.
- Host one or two Bridges friends with supporters to a deeper conversation in my Guelph home every month or so. We can talk about something we specially share. We could enjoy lunch together and perhaps a hike in nature.
- Other Bridges members might also host smaller gatherings in other places when they share interests or live fairly close together. Already our friends in the south do meet from time to time. New people may be interested in joining.
- Continue enabling communicators to get more experience and training in best practices.
- Encourage and train new people to become supporters and assistants of ST.
- Work hard to keep in touch with other friends and allies and help everyone to understand the value of Supported Typing and our rights to communicate.

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News from Bridges members

Kevin Rockefeller in Simcoe, Norfolk County: "I have been keeping busy. I am really enjoying my IPAD and I have downloaded some great matching games which I enjoy. Ken [Misener] and I are thinking about starting a monthly Bridges meeting from my home in the New Year. I would invite Doug from Port Dover and Sarah from Simcoe. Maybe we could skype sometimes. I will let you know how things are going in the New Year. Hope Everyone has a Wonderful Christmas!!!

Matt Macdonald in downtown Toronto: "I was an ambassador for Bridges at a Nabors event on Nov 24. "It was a big success and also very interesting to talk to people about Bridges. I gave people copies of *In Our Own Words* and *Holding in the Storm*."

Some of us attended the **special events in the GTA showing the film *Wretches and Jabberers***, with opportunities to meet the stars Larry and Tracy, their facilitators and the film's award-winning director Geraldine Wurzburg.

Anne Morris-Dadson wrote: "John, Jim and I enjoyed seeing *Wretches and Jabberers* and meeting Larry and Tracy at York University yesterday (Oct 24]. I noticed that Tracy uses a key guard on his ipad and that his supporter does not look at the ipad, but rather at Tracy to ensure that he is looking at the ipad when he communicates. Tracy looks directly at the keys. I am going to practice doing this with John, using his Dynavox since it has a key guard. I will also be ordering a keyguard for John's ipad from laserpics.com. They sell key guards designed for both AssistExpress and Proloquo2go."

Andrew Werner of Oshawa with his sister Natalie and supporter Gemma attended the Oct 25 morning showing at the Hot Docs Cinema on Bloor. They asked one of Andrew's prepared questions and would have like to ask more. Andrew would like to know more about apps and keyguards. In the discussion following the film, our Toronto friend **Leah Dolmage** mentioned our Bridges-Over-Barriers group and asked for advice to make ST/FC better known and accepted in Canada.

Jacquie Ferguson tells us of useful iOS5 features

iOS 5 came with a few hidden features that we've been discovering over time, and one is that it can read just about any text to you. This feature is disabled by default, but after enabling it you can have your iPhone, iPad, or iPod touch speak pretty much any text aloud.

To enable this feature, follow these steps or (watch the video above for a demonstration):

1. Open the Settings app on your home screen.
2. Tap the General tab.
3. Scroll down and tap the Accessibility tab.
4. Tap the Speak Selection option (it should be set to off, currently).
5. Tap the toggle switch to turn it on. You can also adjust the rate of speech as well. It's worth noting, however, that the default is already pretty fast. If anything, you might want to slow it down.

Once you've got Speak Selection enabled, just highlight any text like you would if you were going to copy it but tap the "Speak" button instead. This option will change to "Pause" while the text is being spoken so you can stop it at any point. Pretty cool!

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Kevin Vasey offers these two new poems about how he sees Bridges and how he has matured in greater acceptance of life's challenges.

Community

Bridges is a community of friends
who share their deepest thoughts and dreams.
We are a band of warriors, inheritors
of our parents' strength, determination and patience.
We are pioneers, teaching the world about
humanity, sensitivity and intelligence.
We are stars sprinkled through a universe
of misunderstanding and misconceptions.
Above all, we are trusted, caring friends,
holding each other in our hearts and prayers,
sending out thought-messages:
Take courage!
I love you.
Be at peace.

Becoming

I have become more mature in my acceptance
of autism with its gifts and challenges.
I realize that who I am
consists of body, mind and spirit,
of life experiences
and the people who have been there for me.

This awareness has made me
happier with my accomplishments,
more tolerant of my weaknesses,
more trusting of friends and family,
more hopeful that my future
will unfold as it should.

Still, I continue to regularly battle
demons that threaten to unnerve me.
At those times, I descend into a pit of darkness
where anxieties bubble around me,
feeding my fears and worries.

In the darkness, I turn to God.
Angels enfold me in calming, protective embrace.
My soul smiles.

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Trained Communication Assistants Needed!

Through our videos, books and other publications, including our Song of Hope, we are making people more aware of our rights and abilities as communicators. People of all ages are hopeful and want 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 helping the person to 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!

Film News

***Holding in the Storm* has won recognition at two film festivals in the United States—Columbus and Bakersfield.** In November our director-producer Christine with her associate Deirdre flew to Bakersfield, California to join in the festival that featured our film.

Christine writes: *We didn't walk away with a trophy but feel like winners for being a part of this wonderful festival. We had a fantastic time here and met really great people. The film showed on a 47 foot screen in a 5,050 seat old vaudevillian theatre. They treated us like stars. We had a lot of people interested in talking to us about the film. It was a first rate festival. Joey Travolta and his team are amazing. They have 4 different film workshops they teach across the US to people with special needs. So our category of films 'by or about' persons with special needs were awarded to all the 'bys'. It was great to see them recognized and given these opportunities just like anyone else. You would have loved to be here. Some wonderful films. All the DVDs went and I likely could have brought a lot more. I brought over 50 bookmarks and they all went too. So you may hear from people in the US as I was really promoting GSA and Bridges and encouraged them to connect with you.*

You can see the film again at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7RKiabgFCc> and the associated blog at <http://holdinginthestorm.blogspot.ca/> We are happy to provide free copies of the booklet with dvd to people who will be interested and share it. Email request to ebloomfi@uoguelph.ca Christine has also posted our Bridges documentary ***In Our Own Words*** (2010) on youtube. It's at this link: <http://youtu.be/JentrBCN7>

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Our Right to Communicate and Make Decisions about Our Own Lives

I composed the following declaration for Elizabeth to quote in a public lecture recently:

I am the Author of my story. I need always to have my voice heard. Even though it is a light tap of the keys rather than a loud sounding voice from my mouth, it is powerful and full of meaning. When we cannot talk in one way or another, we lose our cool and get very angry or frustrated. I need to have my way to communicate or I will explode.

To be seen and heard and believed to be intelligent adults, and not disabled children, makes a difference in how we see ourselves. I pick up on your attitudes and perceptions. If I am with people who convey they do not believe I have the ability to talk, then I lose my own confidence and prove their disbelief.

You can look at how our lives have changed since we have been given a way to express our thoughts and words. We are people that experts said do not like to be touched and we allow our bodies and typing arms to be supported and stabilized. We are people that experts said have short attention spans to tasks but I stay in a conversation for two hours. We can listen closely to others and are more able to participate in what life has to offer.

I am the Author of my words. Never give up on finding a way to give someone without a voice a means to communicate. We have a lot of catching up to do since many of us have been effectively mute a large part of our lives. You need to listen and make sure you are hearing all the messages with both your eyes and ears.

It is my decision because it is my life to live. I need to hear from others to make an informed decision but the end result is what I need and want. I make my decisions with the support of my friends and family. I need to have them to make sure I am heard correctly.

I am the Author of my life. I dream to be free. I dream to be me. My hope is to give others hope. I am a man who was behind the cement walls of a prison imposed by a system that could not see people's potential. If I can now talk to others like intelligent people do, then most any dream can come true!

It is very important for us to find reliable ways to express ourselves and be believed. Laws are changing in Ontario and elsewhere to recognize the legal rights of people with disabilities to be “independent but not alone”.

We are fortunate in our Bridges allies—notably for this goal Barbara Collier of Communication Disabilities Access Canada: www.cdacanada.com CDAC also operates the CAN website: www.communication-access.org 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.