
Pittsburgh-North Head Injury Organization: An Empowerment Group

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Psychology and Social Impairment, HRS 2708
10/8/97

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1991) was passed into law to extend civil rights to those individuals in this country that are with a disability; which is known to be in the range of 35 to 53 million people. Today, the groups/organizations that lobbied for the passage of the ADA continue their efforts in hopes of heightening the general public's awareness that individuals with disabilities are still viewed as outcasts in the community. Collectively, these organizations can safely be described as empowerment groups based on their philosophy and mission of the membership. The notion of empowerment involves both the disabled individual and the at large community with the emphasis being placed on inclusion of individuals with a disability into the community as opposed to changing them to fit into the community. In order for them to be included in a community, we must define what "community" means. Dr. Condeluci defines a community/culture as having three parts: a theme, members that value this theme, and a gatekeeper. The theme is the common belief shared by the members within the community that value and invest of themselves to keep the community vibrant. The gatekeeper is a valued member of the community, a risk-taker, the first person encountered in the community, and the one responsible for the inclusion of others into the community, which results in empowerment. It stresses the community's responsibility to recognize the strengths, instead of weaknesses, of the person. A barter-like system is established where the community utilizes the strengths of the disabled, thereby making them a contributor to society and, in return, the disabled are included in the community. Simply, the ADA has provided avenues to community life for those people that were previously denied, but "it opens the community to the gifts, capacities, and contributions of a forgotten group" – individuals with disabilities.¹

The Pittsburgh-North Head Injury Organization* is an empowerment group dedicated to improving the overall quality of life of those individuals that have had any head or traumatic brain injury (TBI). This non-profit organization is composed of all survivors of a head injury and/or traumatic brain injury and their family members. The gatekeeper, Tom Byrnes, is a survivor himself, and founded the organization predicated on the lack of social interaction and inclusion in the at-large community that he felt after his TBI.² His mission or aim is to assist the members in maximizing their abilities so that they can achieve greater independence in their daily lives thereby increasing their self-esteem and self-worth. Through workshops, guest lecturers, guest counselors, and group discussions based on self-help, the members are encouraged to view themselves as participants in society instead of by-standers. Mr. Byrnes is a guest lecturer throughout the area in raising the public's awareness by sharing the experiences and concerns of his members with the local communities. "It is really the lack of education in the community about individuals with disabilities, specifically the head injured, that causes some of the helplessness that I see with the membership. The goal is to get the local leaders to focus on the strengths and abilities, not dis-abilities, of the head injured population, which in turn, will build their self-esteem and increase their viability in the community."² One of the main thrusts of the support workshops is interaction and inclusion of the family members as an integral part of counseling and education. The idea is that the family must provide an environment that encourages independence and also desensitizes the helplessness that so many of the members feel. Individuals have been misled to believe that their worth to the community has been greatly diminished as a result of their injury,

* Pittsburgh-North Head Injury Organization. Contact: Tom Byrnes at 967-9292.

especially those that have a severe TBI. Their worth to the community has changed, but not diminished, and this is the attitude that is being confronted during the workshops. Through an experienced sound leadership, insightful and confidence-building guests, the proper counseling, and support from both family and friends, the Pittsburgh-North Head Injury Organization is consistently achieving its goals of improving the self-esteem of its members and facilitating their independence.

REFERENCES

1. Condeluci A. *Interdependence: The Route to Community*. PMD Press, Inc.: Orlando, FL. 1991.
2. Byrnes T. Interview. Founder of the Pittsburgh-North Head Injury Organization.