

The Power of the Personal Story

From the www.disabilityisnatural.com E-Newsletter by Kathie Snow

Everyone has a personal story. Yours might be shared with others, in the form of your résumé, curriculum vitae (CV), “vita,” and/or biography. And when you wrote it, *you made yourself look good!*

Your personal story probably details your educational and employment histories, along with awards, honors, and/or professional affiliations. And you probably included the *extraordinary talents* you could bring to your next employer.

You didn't, however, include your “warts.” You omitted that you're grumpy until your third cup of coffee, and you detest that “team player” stuff. You left out other negatives, for you *know* the importance of creating a positive impression. Maybe you even embellished—just a little—to present the best image. We all do it, to one degree or another, don't we? Your personal story probably wasn't *the one thing* that landed you in a job—you had to shine during the interview—but it *opened the door* to opportunity.

What if children and adults with disabilities had their own positive personal stories to share? What difference could that make in how we see them and treat them, how others see them, and, most importantly, *how they see themselves*? What doors might be opened? What similarities would be revealed? What talents and interests might be discovered?

Of course, we don't write a person's story *for* him/her—the person must be involved. In some situations, we might do the actual writing; in others, the person writes his/her own story.

But *we* can get the process rolling. Parents: focus on your child with a disability (grandparents, brothers, sisters, etc., can do this for any family member). Teachers: get things moving for your students with disabilities. (Note: parents and teachers may need/want to do this for all their children/students—the other kids won't want to be left out!) If you provide therapeutic, early intervention, residential, vocational,

and/or other services, get the process going for the children and adults you work with.

What should be included in a personal story? The good stuff—just like the good stuff in your story! Include what the person *does well*: is a good listener, a trusted friend, a great mimic, a terrific sister, a hard worker, good with numbers; has a great smile, a positive attitude, etc. Share what the person *enjoys doing*: listening to music, learning to cook, watching scary movies, playing with Legos, etc. Describe the person's *favorites*: food, movie, music, color, TV show, etc. Detail the person's *hopes and dreams*: travel, a job at a veterinarian's office, college, going to a theme park, dinner at a fancy restaurant, marriage and having kids, etc. Gather info from the person with a disability and from others who know the individual—one person may see something that others don't—and be as specific as possible to ensure a complete picture.

What should be left out? The “warts,” of course—those are probably well documented in official assessments! Omit therapeutic/medical info, like: can sit up, has the pincer grasp, etc. You didn't include such info in your story, and it doesn't represent what's really important about the *real person*.

All the good stuff can be formatted as a résumé, written as a “story,” or prepared as a simple list. When it's finished, make copies and share with others. Begin the next planning meeting (IEP, IHP, ISP, etc.) with it; give a copy to everyone in the person's life (teachers, therapists, service providers, new friends, potential employers, etc.); and update it on a regular basis.

If you were known primarily by “negatives,” you wouldn't be very successful. Your life is better because you share the good stuff (and minimize or omit the bad). Now imagine the wonderful outcomes when children and adults with disabilities are known by their good stuff. Let's get busy and make it happen!