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## Cultivating change. A culture of innovation supporting choice and citizenship

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*Patti Scott und David Hasbury*

## **Cultivating Change: A Culture of Innovation Supporting Choice and Citizenship**

### **Abstract**

For more than 25 years Neighbours Inc. has developed a culture of innovation to sustain our capacity to be responsive to people's lives as they grow and change. This writing captures the origins of the need for change, and creating ways for people to direct their lives with the support of an agency. The development of an organizational culture of innovation includes: ongoing clarity of vision and purpose; organizational structures that align with this vision and purpose; frameworks and paradigms to guide the work; staff roles; and reflective action practices that inspire creativity, celebrate failure, and embrace change. Personal stories are laced throughout to demonstrate an innovative organizational culture in action.

Seit mehr als 25 Jahren hat Neighbours Inc. eine Kultur der Innovation entwickelt, um als Organisation in der Lage zu sein, Menschen in den Veränderungen und Entwicklungen in ihrem Leben responsiv zu begleiten. Dieser Beitrag skizziert die Ausgangssituation und Notwendigkeit für Veränderung damit Menschen ihr eigenes Leben selbstbestimmt mit der Unterstützung durch eine Organisation gestalten konnten. Zu der dafür notwendigen Entwicklung einer innovativen Organisationskultur gehören: eine klare Vision und ein klares Bild wofür die Organisation steht; Organisationsstrukturen, die mit dieser Vision und diesem Zweck übereinstimmen; ein dazu passender Rahmen welcher die fachliche Arbeit anleitet; die Rollen der Mitarbeiter\*innen; reflexive Handlungspraktiken welche die Kreativität anregen; eine Haltung auch das Scheitern zu feiern und Veränderungen zulassen. Diese Elemente einer innovativen Organisationskultur sollen in diesem Beitrag durch Persönliche Geschichten veranschaulicht werden.

### **1 Introduction**

In 1995, support models available to people labeled with a disability in the USA were congregated, including group homes, institutions, supervised apartments, foster care settings, day programs, and sheltered employment. 'Programs' were designed and controlled by agencies. People had minimal choice of where they

would live, who they would live with, and what their daily life looked like. Those seeking support waited to fit into congregated program spaces with limited options for controlling the direction of their lives, hopes, and dreams.

In the mid to late 1990s, state governments began exploring funding new support models under headings like 'self-determination' or 'self-direction'. Individualized funding packages were allocated to approved individuals (or their families) for them to hire and manage staff on their own. However, people with complex support needs, or uninvolved families were most often excluded from these opportunities.

The limited number of people who chose these self-directed options discovered that so much of their time was spent managing their budget, staff and services. Little time or energy remained to live the very life they desired.

By 1995, a small number of organizations across the US (and other countries) explored how agencies could individualize support. Neighbours Inc. (referred to as Neighbours throughout this chapter) was one of these organizations established to individualize support for people throughout New Jersey (NJ) regardless of complexity of their needs or the amount of connection and engagement with their family.

Neighbours' design questions became:

- How might we support people, one at a time, to direct their own lives; to live as citizens, engaged and contributing as valued members of the communities and neighborhoods where they live, work, and belong?
- How might we design an organization that is flexible enough to support people in developing and sustaining the pursuit of meaning and purpose over the course of a lifetime as circumstances, health, rules and regulations, and relationships are changing?
- How might we sustain our organization's mission and values over the long haul.

Note: In the stories shared throughout the chapter, some of the names have been changed to respect the privacy of people involved.

## 2 A Rationale for Designing Something New: A Story

On a Friday night in 1995 I (Patti Scott) spent several hours on the phone with representatives from the New Jersey State Developmental Disabilities agency. We were debating the future of a woman I had grown to know well over the course of a year. She had lived through a difficult time. We had planned for her future based upon her dreams. She saw herself in her own place with needed supports; having a job; falling in love; getting married. With support from her family and case manager, a plan came into place for her to have the life she wanted. There seemed to be no reason she wouldn't move forward.

The debate with the State representative challenged whether this future would become a reality. While everyone agreed the supports could work, and were financially viable, there were existing group home ‘slots’ that could accommodate her. The woman, her father, her brother, and I went back and forth with the powers that be for several hours (this was pre-conference call days), and finally, around 9pm, her fate was determined. She was told by the funders that she could either go back home to her father’s house (a situation that had been truly disastrous) or move into an existing ‘slot’. It was a devastating moment for all of us.

This moment crystallized the knowledge that the system and models of support available at the time were designed to obstruct the values of choice, control, citizenship, and community inclusion. I did not want to be part of a system that was, in fact, oppressing people.

This heartbreaking experience inspired the creation of an organization with a mission to enable people to design and live the life of their choosing; as citizens. Neighbours was formed as a non-profit organization designed to support people one at a time. This ‘supported living’ model supports 35-40 people in towns across New Jersey since it began supporting Brad in 1995 (see video, “Riding Life-Brad Goldman” 2011).

### 2.1 Mission: Discovering Your People, Place and Purpose

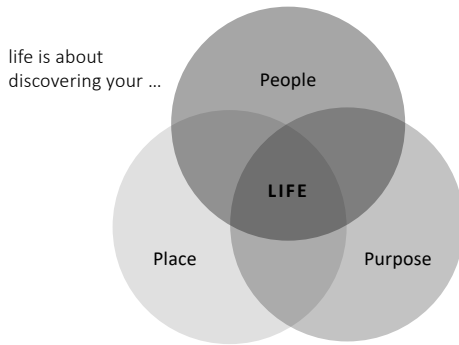


Fig. 1: People, Place, Purpose (Neighbours International, Inc. CC BY-SA 4.0)

We support people to discover their people, place, and purpose, shaping and directing the life they want to live.

*‘People’*: ‘our people’, those to whom we belong; who we choose to be in reciprocal relationships with; who we turn to and celebrate with; who are with us through life’s joys and sorrows.

'Place': places shared with others – home, neighborhood gathering spaces, work places. It considers our place in the world; where we are known for bringing value and contributing; where we are missed when we do not show up.

'Purpose': our reason to get up and out of bed, to contribute to others, to make a difference, to be recognized as needed.

These are cornerstones for a good, rich, and meaningful life.

### 3 Designing A Third Way – A New Organizational Structure

In contrast to congregated programs controlled by agencies or the alternative of people assuming sole responsibility for managing self-directed support, Neighbours chose a 'third way'. We work in partnership with people and their families. People have the support of an agency, yet remain as directors of their life, supports, and resources.

Neighbours made some key design decisions to realize this vision.

*Individualizing funding:* In 1995 New Jersey's Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) served as the source of government funding for services. The State did not have a model for individualized budgets and agencies were funded to provide congregated programs.

We researched the average cost of the dominant model of congregated living arrangements (group homes of 6 people), proposed to the State that individuals supported by Neighbours would receive 1/6 of a group home budget, regardless of 'individual needs'.

Neighbours created an accounting model that individualized support budgets.

The State government has changed funding models numerous times. Now in NJ, each person is allocated an individual budget based on their assessed support needs. In spite of changing funding models, Neighbours has worked to sustain individualizing budgets for more than 25 years.

*No real estate:* Neighbours chose not to own any real estate.

People would own or rent the homes where they live.

We have no company office. While there is a physical address where files are kept, no one works there. Meetings held there are solely for auditing purposes.

We meet with people in their homes and available community spaces.

*Co-management: A Collaborative Partnership:* Neighbours established a 'co-management' model, a partnership with the people we work for (and their key family members and allies).

People make the decisions about where and how they want to live.

Neighbours serves as the legal employer of record, responsible for financial accounting, processing payroll, knowledge of labor laws, and ensuring that appro-

priate accounting and reporting to government funding occurs. We support people in all aspects of recruiting, hiring and managing staff as needed.

If a person decides that they no longer want Neighbours to provide support, the funding available for their supports follows them to their agency of choice.

*Advisor Role:* Neighbours established the role of an Advisor to assist people in growing into their role as ‘managing employer’ and ‘director’ of their own lives and supports. Advisors are Neighbours employees supporting people to discover and manage resources available for the life they want to live Typically, an Advisor works for 4 to 6 people.

Ten full time Advisors support people and their teams, including fulfilling all compliance and audit work required for government funding.

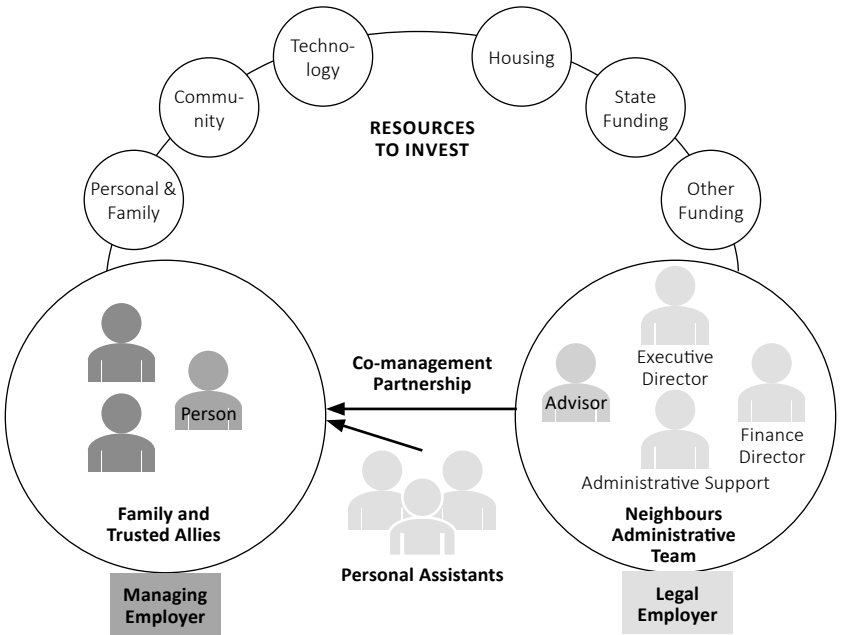


Fig. 2: Resources to Invest (Neighbours International, Inc. CC BY-SA 4.0)

*No ‘Programs’:* Neighbours has no ‘programs’. We spend time getting to know each person and the people who love them, and discover what is important to them. Our conversations explore: where people want to live; do they want to live alone or with others; what kind of support they need to manage their budgets and hire Personal Assistants; what they are interested in; how they want to spend their time. Advisors support people to grow and change through becoming informed, making decisions about actions they can try, and learning from experience.

People we work for have not been educated 'to be in charge' of their own lives. Advisors assist people in learning how to customize their support and build their capacity to be in charge of the day-to-day aspects of life.

*Personal Assistants:* Personal Assistants are the employees of the person who they provide direct support daily. They are hired by the person (and their family), who determine the job descriptions, schedules, and work tasks of the people they hire, with as much support as needed from their Advisor.

Neighbours takes care of all of the legal aspects related to employment including payroll, required State training, criminal background checks, and monitoring labor law practices, etc. Assistants know that they work for the person for whom they provide support.

There are now 53 full time and 89 part time Assistants employed by the people we work for.

*Two Rules Guide Decision Making:* The service system assumes that people are not capable of directing their own lives. Neighbours chooses to demonstrate *how* people can do so with support. However, this remains a radical concept.

Neighbours established two rules for understanding the boundaries of decision making by asking the following questions:

- Does this involve neglect, abuse, or exploitation?
- Is it illegal?

If the answer to these is 'no', Advisors continue exploring what is possible and identify resources that can support these choices.

Government agencies fund personal supports, housing, and health. However, they have their own rules and requirements to access and use funding. Advisors assist people in learning about these rules and what is required to use these resources.

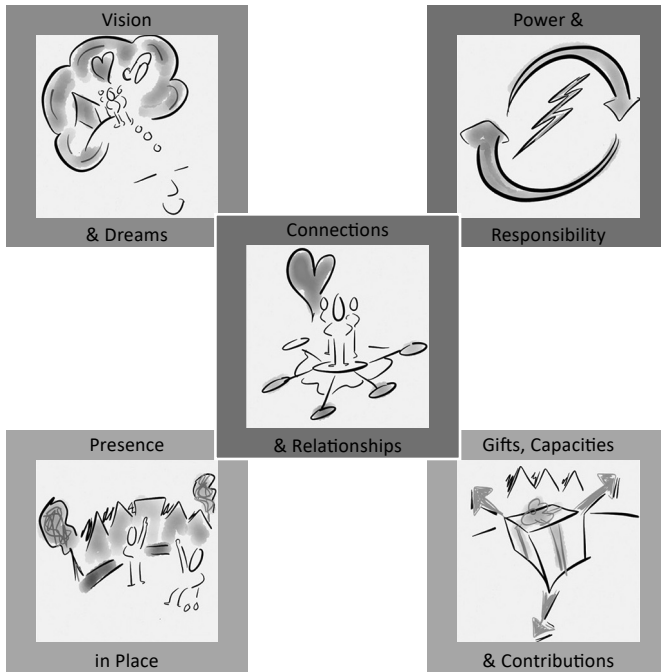
### 3.1 Shifting Paradigms – From Purchasing Services to Investing in Citizenship

State governments shifted from funding and managing institutions to contracting and purchasing services provided by community non-profit organizations and private for profit businesses. Most of these agencies developed program centered models based on managing participant 'beds/spaces/slots' with staffing ratios, time allocations, and statistics to account for the use of government tax dollars.

Neighbours chose a different model, partnering with individuals (and those people they love and trust) to invest the 'assets' and resources available to increase their capacity to live as citizens and contributing community members.

Investing means devoting time, effort, resources, and energy to expand what is possible. Investing expects growth and change in experiences, relationships, wealth, skills, etc.

### 4 A Framework for Investing



**Fig. 3:** Framework for Investing (Neighbours International, Inc. CC BY-SA 4.0)

We have developed a framework to guide and focus investment of resources. We focus on investing in these five areas so that people can lead a meaningful life, filled with people, purpose, and place.

#### 4.1 Vision and Dream

Between the age of 13-30 years old, Malcolm had lived in a series of foster homes and congregated living facilities. He came to Neighbours seeking to get out of the nursing home where he lived and set up his own life.

He had a clear vision. He had lived in Hackensack, NJ when he was young. He wanted to go back to reconnect with people he had known when he was a boy; to be involved in his local church; to return to school and get his GED. He wanted to work, to meet someone he could fall in love with, settle down, and make a home.



His clarity of vision made it possible for his Advisor to assist him in finding financial resources to buy a 2-bedroom condo in the center of town that he could share with a house mate who would be around in overnight hours when Malcolm did not have Assistants available. He reconnected with people he knew. He would drive his electric wheelchair through town on his own. He made a conscious effort to get to know people and be a good neighbor.

Neighbours role was listening, following Malcolm's vision, assisting him to access resources, and get out of the way so that he could become known.

Over 20 years Malcolm followed his vision, to try new things, meet new people, and learn about what worked and what did not work for him.

The world is not designed to include people with disabilities. They run the risk of just getting 'what exists' if they do not invest in developing a vision and dream of what they would hope their life could be. Creating a valued life and experience in our communities depends upon people with disabilities and those who know and love them, imagining together what that life could look like.

Hearing someone's clear heartfelt dreams, and a deep desire for their future, moves people...if there is something that we 'can do' to make someone's dream come true, people are motivated to do it.

*Practices that support visions and dreams:* People with disabilities have been told that 'dreaming is not realistic'. We believe that dreaming is essential, but it is a skill that takes practice that we support through:

- Simply encouraging people (individuals and their families) to talk about their dreams and visions. We listen for, and affirm, what is important to them. This is what shapes the direction for action.
- Holding a 'safe space'surrounded by people they know and trust, to share their deepest hopes and feelings.
- Assuring the opportunity to explore and experience new ideas, interests and possibilities, and notice what sparks interest in them.
- Using visual tools in planning, drawing what people would like their life to look like. We work to make it possible for people to visually see what is important in a form they can use to share with others.
- Facilitating planning, utilizing MAPS and PATH, visual community building planning processes (see O'Brien & Pearpoint 2007 and O'Brien, Pearpoint & Kahn 2010) that bring people together who know and care this person, to imagine desirable futures, discover what actions are possible now, and plan for them.

## 4.2 Power and Responsibility

After living in a 'Hospital School' for almost 25 years, Ryan was clear that he wanted freedom to live in his own place, get around on his own, and do what other 25-year-old men did. He requires physical assistance for personal care, taking care of his home, and transportation/driving.

Ryan had a clear vision and desire to be in charge of his life. This included hiring and managing his Assistants, something that was new to him when he started. Patti was Ryan's first Advisor. They figured out what he needed his Assistants to do, and when he needed them to do it. Together they planned for how they would recruit Assistants. They created flyers, posted ads, and set up interviews.

After the interviews, they talked about which people Ryan would like to hire. Ryan was clear about who he preferred – 3 young women (all very attractive). Patti spoke with Ryan about what he wanted and needed in his Assistants. She shared her opinion that a couple of these people might not be the best choices, particularly for that sense of reliability that Ryan required. However, Ryan was determined about his choices, and he hired the 3 young women.

It quickly became obvious that some of his choices were not reliable, showing up late or not at all. At those times Ryan would call Patti to fill in. Eventually Patti had a conversation with Ryan and his mom (a key person in Ryan's life) to talk about how this staff arrangement was not working. His physical and safety needs required that he counted on people showing up as scheduled each day. Patti was not hired as his Personal Assistant. Ryan had to think about what he needed, and how he would take responsibility for getting and keeping it.

Ryan has been hiring Assistants for more than 25 years now. Of the 3 main people he currently has working for him, 2 of them are men. His primary Personal Assistant has been with Ryan for almost 20 years and has become someone he can count on.

People have experienced limited choice and control, or practice in learning how to balance power with responsibility. Advisors assist people to become informed, consider potential consequences, calculate risks, and celebrate success and failure.

*Practices that support Power and Responsibility:*

- *Financial:* people are in charge of their financial resources, decisions and relationships; this includes bank accounts, leases for their homes, credit ratings, and paying their bills.
- *Employees:* people are the managers of their Personal Assistants, determining what they hire people to do, and when they need them to do it.
- *Self direction:* People are supported to determine the direction for they lives and plan how to get there.

### 4.3 Gifts, Capacities, and Contributions

Jasmine was the last person to move out of a Developmental Center that was closing in the central part of the state. She had grown up in institutions since she was a young child and had no ties to her family or connections beyond the facility. While living in the institution Jasmine would have periods when she would become extremely anxious, and during these times she had developed a reputation for pulling hair. Everyone was nervous about how Jasmine would do living in the community, and how other people who came in contact with her might be impacted.

Neighbours Advisor helped Jasmine find a quiet apartment, hire staff, and begin to explore spending time in her community. When she moved into her own apartment with the support of staff during the day and a roommate at night, the setting was much quieter, and Jasmine learned how to relax.

As time passed the staff who were getting to know Jasmine, began to see that there were other sides to her, beyond the reputation she brought with her from the institution. They learned that Jasmine embodied joy when people would come to visit, or show up for their shift. She had an incredible memory. She would ask questions about your family, who was in it, where they live, how they were doing, and she would never forget. Every time she would see you, she would call out your name, laugh, and give you a big hug. And if you received this hug, you just felt good, because Jasmine was genuinely happy to see you.

Jasmine's Advisor would gather with her Assistants and housemate to think about where Jasmine could be welcomed and valued in the community. They tried a variety of places, and even when they did not work out as hoped, they did not give up.

Everyone on the team really believed in Jasmine's gift as someone who could warm your heart and make you smile. They surfaced the idea of volunteering at a local soup kitchen. They imagined Jasmine would be particularly good at bringing some sunshine to people who may be having a hard time, without a home, disconnected from loved ones. Sure enough, every day that Jasmine saw people who would come back to the soup kitchen, she would remember them, call out their name, run to them, give them a big hug, and ask them how they were doing. Jasmine volunteered at that same soup kitchen for more than a decade. One year Jasmine received 'Volunteer Of The Year', in recognition of her valuable contributions.

Labeling people as "disabled" has focused on aspects of their lives that don't appear to work well, or are not valued. Minimal attention has been focused on unique gifts, capacities, creativity, and strengths people can offer, and where and how these contributions may be needed, welcomed, and appreciated.

People need to be seen as contributors, developing talents, skills, and gifts to be shared.

#### *Practices that support Gifts and Capacities*

- Advisors engage in conversations with individuals, their families, friends and Assistants, about what this person has to offer, raising the consciousness of the individual, and those who know them, focusing on what they can and do bring to the world.
- MAPS re-vision people, providing a powerful opportunity to gather a group who care about someone, share stories and experiences, imagine dreams and visions, thinking about who this person is, what they can contribute, and what they need to make those contributions as they move toward their dreams and visions.

#### 4.4 Presence In Place

Pearl had lived with her parents and brothers in Western NJ until she was 29 years old when her mother passed away in the mid 1940s. It was not uncommon for families to be advised by doctors and professional staff that 'the best place for your daughter or sister to live would be an institution'. Her father trusted the recommendations. She moved to an institution about 1 1/2 hours away in the center of the State.

She lived there for almost 50 years, when the State made the decision to close this facility. By that point in life, Pearl had no interest in moving.

Patti visited Pearl while she was still living in the institution. Neighbours had already begun working for a number of people with some success that had been built around the idea of pursuing each person's 'dreams'. Patti approached Pearl with enthusiasm, attempting to engage her in conversation about dreams and possibilities. Pearl, slouched over, barely tolerated listening to her, raised her head, looked at her eye to eye, and said 'F \_\_\_\_ OFF'.

Patti knew that the institution was closing, so she committed to coming back, trying new ways to get to know Pearl, and slowly discover what she loved and envisioned. Eventually Patti learned from staff at the institution that Pearl liked the feral cats that lived out back. So, Patti brought a cat for Pearl. Pearl named the cat Tommy. She clearly loved spending time with Tommy, and it changed her relationship with Patti. Pearl shared how she had two brothers who she remembered and missed. When asked where she would like to live, Pearl said she wanted to live near her brothers.

The Advisor set off in search of Pearl's brothers and a place to live near them. Only one of her brothers was still alive. Time and distance had separated them, but he looked forward to spending time with Pearl.

Her Advisor helped Pearl find a house that she could rent. It was a 2-bedroom house, and they found a woman who was a student who could live with Pearl. Most days Pearl would spend some time with her brother, either visiting him at his house or having him over to visit.

Eventually she indicated she wanted to 'retire' from the Seniors Day Program, a totally sensible idea at 80 years of age. This required sorting out how Pearl could be supported to spend her time in the way she wanted.

Pearl had some staff and new friends who spent time during the day with her, and who supported her in managing life at home. They would bake cookies together, and then take the cookies to neighbors or invite people over for tea. She got to know the young mothers who had small children in the neighborhood. They would bring their children over to Pearl's, where they would have cookies and spend time with Pearl and her pets, with her staff there to help watch the children. Pearl grew to love coloring her hair and doing nail art with the young neighbors and staff.

Pearl now had Tommy the cat living with her, but she also had a bird and a dog. It was clear that Pearl loved animals, and they seemed to love her. Pearl's Advisor and staff explored how Pearl could spend some of her time engaged with animals. Eventually they discovered that there was an active Dog Show circuit in the area near where Pearl lived. Pearl would attend the dog shows and got to know all of the 'regulars' on the circuit and their owners.

By the time Pearl died in her mid-80's, she had become known as a sister, an aunt, a housemate, a neighbor, a 'grandmother', a pet enthusiast, animal lover, and a much loved regular on the Dog Show circuit. The funeral parlor was full of people who had come to know and love her.

People have experienced rejection in regular community places. They need the support of people who are courageous, and skilled in social situations, people who are fearless in their capacity to get to know people, and introduce them to others in ways that are positive and intriguing.

#### *Practices That Support Presence In Place*

- Neighbours Advisors meet with people and their Assistants, in local community places, their homes, coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, and other gathering spaces. By showing up people become recognized and known. Advisors and Assistants act as introducers and bridges to local community folk, facilitating getting to know each other in positive ways.
- We explore what each person cares about (sports, social settings, art, music, food, gardening, etc.); where do people who care about these things gather?; when do they gather?; what kind of support will the person, and their Assistants need. We want people to become known in ways they will be missed when they do not show up.
- Advisors support people to think about how they would like to become known as a 'good neighbor'; how they can be seen as helpful, responsible, friendly, neighborly; and what can Assistants do to support this.

We strive to be aware of what is happening in neighborhoods and communities, and support people to show up at the right time in the right way. We look for neighborhood projects such as gardens, park clean up, street parties and festivals, or supporting local individuals in hard times.

## 4.5 Connections and Relationships

Jason experienced 'group home' placements that did not work for him, and he was forced to leave. Devastated, his mother Salene approached Neighbours in search of 'another way'. Jason was in his 20s at the time. He is blind and does not use a lot of speech to communicate. Salene raised Jason (and his brother) as a working single parent. Jason has his own way of communicating, particularly in his emotional presence. People who are prepared to pay attention know when Jason is OK and happy, and when he is not.

Salene had two foundational dreams for Jason:

- He would never be forced to leave his home again.
- Other people would come to know and love Jason as the wonderful guy she knew him to be

Salene was able to use available financial resources to purchase a condo that Jason could live in. They needed an organization that would be willing to support Jason to live in his own home.

Jason and Salene chose Neighbours to be that organization. Recruiting Assistants who could establish a good relationship with Jason, in order to make sure he was safe in his own home, and support him to make connections with other people, became priority.

Nick was one of the first people hired. He was in his 20's, a laid-back social guy, who had friends in college. Nick enjoyed being out doing 'stuff'. He got along with Jason well. They would go out together to do 'stuff'. Nick would meet people and introduce Jason to the folks he met.

The condo where Jason lived had a swimming pool. Jason loves the water and so does Nick. Jason and Nick became 'regulars' at the pool during the warm months of summer. They met Ellen and her then 6-year-old son, Justin, at the pool. It was a great place to ease into getting to know Jason who is genuinely happy when he is in the water. He also really loves people, and senses when he has made a good connection. Ellen and her family became friends with Jason and Nick. She became an ally in the condo complex, and when issues would arise, Ellen could help Jason and his neighbors bridge the issues.

Nick would invite his friends, who were attending the local college, to stop in and 'hang out' with them. Tommy was one of those guys who would drop in and hang out. Jason is a warm and friendly guy when relaxed, with others who are relaxed. Tommy thought... 'Jason is a cool guy to hang out with', and he would often stop by after classes. Eventually Nick left his job as Jason's Personal Assistant, but he stayed connected as Jason's friend.

As a single Mom, Salene has always wondered, 'who will be there for Jason when I am not around?' Advisors supported Jason and Salene to gather a 'support circle', people who know and care about Jason, who explore ongoing questions, problem solving, planning, and celebrating. Jason's circle included Nick, Ellen, Justin, Tommy, and others they came to know, along with Jason's Assistants and Advisor.

Jason's circle found what worked for them, what enabled them to remain faithful to being involved in his life. They chose to gather every 6-8 weeks, usually for no more than 1 1/2 hours. They get together at 5:30 or 6:00pm so that people could stop by on their way home from work. They would have pizza, or snacks and talk about life and how it is going. They imagined ideas of what Jason (and they) might explore next. They planned how it all might work, and who would do what. And when the moment was right, they took time out to celebrate... Jason loves a good party.

Jason's Advisor helped by facilitating conversations, listening, recording what people talked about, and sharing with the group so they could follow up on things they identified.

Salene came to circle gatherings often, but not always. She knew that she didn't have to, as the Advisor would keep the invitations to gather going, and people came, because they had grown to know and love Jason. Diane, one of Jason's circle members, said that the circle meetings 'are really quite magical... they serve as a model for humanity, when people come together to pay attention to one person and how they can live a full life'.

We all need people who know and value who we are, people who walk through life with us, knowing how we make a difference. This is how we can make it through whatever life brings.

Advisors hold onto the design question, ‘how might we engage with people we support in ways that leave them with more, and deeper, connections when we are done?’

### *Practices That Support Connections and relationships*

- Support circles are ways of gathering people who know and care about a person. We have found that it is a powerful way to make change and provide continuity to relationships and the stories they hold, beyond the time of any particular staff or agency. People can choose to gather a circle, or not.
- Service system programs often have a revolving door of staff coming in and out of people’s lives. People often experience deep connection with particular staff, but lose that connection when the staff moves on. Advisors help people think about significant people from their past and facilitate ways they might stay connected with them.
- We encourage everyone involved (families, Assistants, Advisors, etc.) to explore their own personal networks for potential connections and introductions to people, places, and experiences.

## 5 Keeping The Spirit Alive Over Time: The Iterative Cycle of Learning

Constant innovation is required to keep up with people’s growth and changes in their capacities, vision, relationships, and interests. It involves trial and error, and openness to learn from success and failure.

Prototyping is a design practice for innovation. It is a way to shape action by building on doing what we can with what we have to make more possible for people where they live.

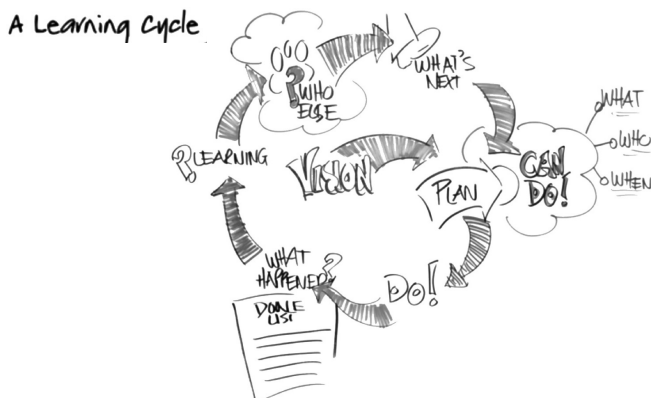


Fig. 4: A Learning Cycle (Neighbours International, Inc. CC BY-SA 4.0)

Over the years Neighbours has embraced a Learning Cycle Framework (Fig. 4). This brings together people who care to consider:

- VISIONING what is important? What does the person want to see happen?
- CAN DO planning – what can we do about what is important with the people and resources we have available?
- Our focus is learning by ‘doing’, committing to action and following through. Success or failure are simply opportunities to learn from and build upon.
- Come together to talk about ‘What happened’ when we did what we said we would do.
- We ask ‘What did we learn from doing this?’
- ‘What else/where else/who else?’ – Possibilities change when we try new things. We are no longer in the same place. We can then consider other connections and possibilities that have emerged because we dared try and act.
- ‘What’s next?’ – The whole process brings us back to identify what we can try next.

## 6 The Generative Nature of Neighborhoods: Prototyping in Communities

We continually look for ways to generate tangible growth in people’s lives, where they live.

*Walking Neighborhoods and Building Our Own Social Capital:* We discovered that some staff were struggling to support people we work for in developing local connections. The person we work for may have been new to us, and we did not know much about them; or they were experiencing difficult life circumstances; or they had recently moved to a new neighborhood.

We shifted our approach; we suggested that Assistants and Advisors forget about connecting the people they work for. Instead look to build their ‘own’ social capital in the neighborhood where the person lived. We walked neighborhoods with them (in groups of 3 or less) – meeting people, discovering gifts in the neighborhood, and looking for connection opportunities.

This was based on the work of DeAmon Harges (see Harges 2014). DeAmon had become known as the ‘Roving Listener’ in his approach to community, walking in his own neighborhood, discovering the gifts in the citizens living there (see Mather 2018). DeAmon joined Patti in walking with Assistants and Advisors in a number of neighborhoods.

Walking side by side engaged people’s whole being by exploring the neighborhood and building their own connections, people began to understand their role in a whole new way. This embodied experience created a deeper level of understanding. We developed a practice of reflecting together to discover and share the learning with the whole team.



## 6.1 Investing in Everyone

People who work in this field are underpaid and undervalued. Assistants need to experience being recognized, valued, and cared for, if they are to support the people they work for to have these experiences.

We began recognizing the gifts of Assistants, supporting them to share these gifts in community, even if they did not appear to be related to their job. We provided small grants to people who had a creative community idea they wanted to implement. As a result, Assistants are gaining a deeper understanding of what it means to prototype innovative ideas and sharing gifts in community.

## 7 Conclusion

Since 1995 Neighbours has invested in developing an organizational culture of innovation – flexible, dynamic, creative – supporting people with disabilities to grow their capacity to live as citizens and contributing community members.

We have developed practices, structures, and roles that align with our vision.

We practice ongoing conversations and dialogue on what is important as a reference for identifying actions and then reflection on the experiences that occur.

Our focus is always local, with each person growing a rich life in the community where they live, work, and relate.

We work to create an environment where it is ‘safe to fail’, open up to, and in celebration of failure as learning.

People, circumstances, and relationships change constantly. Prototyping practices seek to address people’s lives as they are ‘now’, trying new things, celebrating successes and failures and doing what we can with what we have to open up possibilities.

Neighbours seeks to embrace the words of Mahatma Gandhi, ‘we must be the change we want to see in the world’.

*With deep respect and gratitude for the vision, passion, and commitment of the people we work for, their families, friends, and Personal Assistants; and the wonderfully creative administration and leadership team of people at Neighbours, Inc. who make this work possible.*

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