

Circle of Friends INVITE THEM

Imagine the people who most care for you, gathering in a circle around you. Imagine other familiar people in your life grouping into surrounding circles. Some of you will have many circles, others barely one. Often, people with disabilities have circles containing only family members or service providers, which makes those people with disabilities feel isolated and rejected by the community.

Several years ago, Marsha Forest, Judith Snow, and others in Canada experimented with a process they called Circle of Friends. To set the stage for friendship, they invited people involved in the life of a person with a disability to join a Circle of Friends.

Their idea was that people care and will help when asked. They learned that circle members themselves receive rewards from being in the circle. In this era of far-away family members and disappearing neighborhoods, Danny's Circle of Friends in El Paso, Texas, is a pretty good idea.

Danny would never be enjoying the life he has now if he did not have angry parents. “Angry” is a mild word for Alfredo and Carmen, the parents of Freddy, Claudia, Itze, and Danny, 12, their youngest who has Down syndrome. They started off furious and got even madder.

Said Carmen of the ignorance and prejudice she has encountered, “You know first because you’re poor and you’re brown or you’re of Mexican descent. Then now it’s a child with a disability. I felt like I was being discriminated against all over again. I am not allowed to belong. There was tension with the early childhood programs—they were telling us that they are the professionals. What they say happens.

“This anger, this tremendous energy that I feel inside, I know I have got to channel it toward something positive, something that will help Danny,” she said.

“There is a negative stereotype about Latinos that sees the woman as perhaps passive when she is not being passive at all. She’s just giving her husband his respect. My mother would say to never let your husband think you are the key person. Let him know that he’s got the forefront. But know that you are the one that is going to make the difference.”

To make the difference, Carmen became a member of The Arc, formerly the Association for Retarded Citizens, and learned about empowerment and advocacy.

“I’d get so frustrated and would tell Alfredo ‘What is so wrong that even special ed, which is supposed to be so prepared and so perfect and so wonderful—they don’t want Danny?’” Carmen said.

Looking for answers, Carmen learned about Circle of Friends when she was the area director of a partner resource network.

“It’s kinda hard for him maybe not to have friends,” Alfredo said. “That’s why we make that Circle of Friends for him.”

The Ramirezes tried to start a circle when Danny was in third grade. Carmen went to Danny’s class and divided the students into circles. The teacher stood alone. In this exercise visualizing exclusion, Carmen asked students how they thought the teacher felt and asked them for ideas how they could help the teacher be part of their group. The children said simply, “We would invite her.”

That year, Danny’s Circle of Friends only went as far as this one classroom exercise. Carmen thought the principal, who opposed any changes for Danny, might be resentful toward him.

However, conditions changed in Danny's fourth-grade year. Carmen launched Circle of Friends with impressive results. She invited students to be Danny's friends and meet during school hours on Fridays. Carmen guided the group at first. Then Leah, 16, circle member Jason's older sister, took over.

"I have learned a lot from Judith Snow, who taught me to follow the children," Carmen said. "They have a lot of the answers because they're there when we are not. I follow their lead. I have given them ideas, but they make the decisions."

For instance, Carmen asked once what the circle members wanted to do for fun. One wanted to go to the amusement park. "Yes, Carmen said, but how are we all going to pay for it?"

The children came up with suggestions and decided car washing was the best idea. Profits were so good that everyone in the Circle, including their brothers and sisters, went to the water amusement park. Besides celebrating birthdays together, circle members ate lunch with Danny and even went together to the principal to say she was not being fair to Danny.

About his Circle, Danny said, "We play basketball. We skate. Go play games." Said his sixth-grade teacher, "I sat in on one of his Circle of Friends and it was incredible. Here are these elementary students having some serious heart-to-heart talks, and they were putting Danny on the spot about his behavior and stuff."

At the end of the year, the Circle of Friends dissolved. The following school year, at Danny's new school, a teacher said:

Help them. Don't carry them

[Carmen Ramirez]

“We sat back for the first few weeks to see how he did at making friends on his own. He’s made a couple of friends. Kids come up to him in the hallway and talk to him and stuff. We think we have a base to go by. And the teachers have been doing a lot of modification to try to get the kids involved. They’re peer tutoring and stuff. Now we’re going to go speak to the students about what a Circle of Friends is and trying to get it started again going full force.”

About Danny, his language arts teacher said: “I am fortunate that Danny has an outgoing attitude, and he gets along with anybody who tends to get along with him. He’s kind of hard not to like.”

“I asked for class volunteers who would like to read a story to Danny, because he may not be as quick but he understands what is read. Several hands went up. The smartest kids are drawn to him probably because they realize that by helping others they help themselves. I think it gives them self-esteem, because they are a role model.”

Lisa Garcia, Danny’s neighbor, said, “When I see him at school, I ask him if he has a problem or something. I go and help him out. Like when he doesn’t know what book to take to class, I’ll tell him.”

Yolanda, another Circle member, also assists Danny at school when he forgets where his locker is. Yolanda helps him find it and open his lock. Danny often pats her on the back, telling her that she is his best friend, and that makes Yolanda feel good.

Those pats also make Jason, another original circle member, feel better about himself. This year Jason asked to be in all the same classes as Danny.

Even though they often sit in different room sections and Jason has friends among other students, Jason always watches out for Danny. “Danny usually listens,” Jason said. “He doesn’t yack at me and tell me to shut up. He makes me feel good when I am in a bad mood.”

Circle of Friends really seemed to be working, Carmen said, when two circle members called Danny and invited him to go someplace.

“A lot of activities that had gone on had always been initiated by Danny and myself,” Carmen said. “Then Yolanda called and asked Danny to a school party. Jason asked him to go swimming.”

Involving peers in Danny’s life has made Danny’s Circle of Friends successful. “Danny has his dreams,” said his teacher.

“To make those dreams come true, you need to get as many people involved as you can. Martin Luther King figured that out. He knew that the only way to make his dream come true was to get all those people involved.”

As the children said, the dream starts with an invitation.