

### ***Reflections on community access***

I recently attended the workshop by Janet Klees entitled, “What We Do In the Meantime”. One concept that struck a chord with me was when Janet talked about strategies to foster inclusive lives within the community.

Many support services are based around the concept of *community access* which involves people venturing out on excursions “into” the community. However, as Janet Klees pointed out, we shouldn’t talk about going *into the community* because in fact we are the community. We need to be constantly thinking about opportunities within the community for developing ongoing relationships. We need to foster connections with people in the various places we go. Just being there is not enough!

I liken “community access” to going on a holiday to a new and exciting place. You often spend your days sightseeing – visiting numerous sites of interest and attending events with a lot of other people. Your day is interesting but exhausting and you come back to your hotel room alone at the end of the day. You rarely make connections with other people, especially the locals, because you are only visiting and you do not keep returning to the same place. Just being there is not enough to form relationships with people. It is even more difficult if you do not speak the same language. If there is difficulty with communication, it is rare that you are able to connect with the locals other than on a really superficial level. If you have a tour guide you are even less likely to connect with other people because the tour guide talks for you and makes all the arrangements. You will tend only to talk with the other people in your tour group.

However if you had the opportunity to stay longer within a new community and you were able to learn the language (or they were able to speak yours), you would inevitably develop connections with people. It would also be more likely that you would develop a valued role within that community.

Janet Klees talks of an “enduring presence” as a way of developing relationships. i.e. being in the same place on a regular basis so that you become known to the same people. She also emphasized the importance of always keeping a radar open for new opportunities within the community for the development of valued roles and how as parents, we have to also be open

to developing relationships. As she put it, *we have to be the community we want for our sons and daughters.*

Dianne Mandeville

(Dianne has a 22 year old son with a disability and has recently begun working for Pave the Way as a development worker.)