

## The story of David and John

**In which a troubled man is offered an advocacy relationship with a peaceful, respectful man and they build a lasting friendship**

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### *Most things are a day at time*

David seems to be the sort of guy who has had almost everything going badly in his life at certain times. As well as being known to have a cognitive impairment, David's life experiences can lead to him becoming distrustful, frustrated, angry and violent, especially with those in his home – his partner and children. By the time David was in his early 30s things were really coming unstuck and his frustration and anger was starting to drive all his interactions. There was constant bickering over money and how the family should be living. At times he lived separately from his partner, their children were in the care of the state child protection authorities, and his housing was in a poor condition with the state run housing authority threatening to evict.

David was introduced to John when Citizen Advocacy South Australia approached a church community in the area in which David was living to find someone who would be prepared to become David's advocate and to support him with issues about his family and government services.

It took a while for John to work out all the aspects of what was going on as many agencies were involved and everyone was so upset and angry. Overtime he came to see that David was so powerless and had so little regard for himself that he did not know how to respond without lashing out. John helped him by going very slowly, a step at a time, an issue at a time, always trying to address his anger, helping him to make sense of what was going on around him. John says that up to this point David had no hope for his future and did not know how to plan anything – he just took most things a day at a time as though he really just conceded that this was his life and he expected nothing more.

Throughout this period, John spent his time helping David deal with the legal issues around his children, ensuring that access arrangements could work, working through concerns in the relationship with David's partner and money matters. It took one or two, sometime three visits every week over a number of years as he tried to sort through the tangled mess that had become David's life. John also came to see that there are aspects of David's approach to life that may not change. For example, he is not an effective financial planner yet wants things he cannot afford, therefore getting into trouble with creditors.

But John also saw and came to relish another side of David – the larrikinish rebellious person with an easy-going core, a person with a deep interest in others and international politics. This means that John is concerned not to let the story of David to be told in bad light –to acknowledge that he is not confined to this story, that he has much more to offer. He is a survivor with astounding practical skills – he can make broken things work again and has an amazing capacity to good in things that other people view simply as junk. Many people have seen David as junk, but John sees him as an amazing man and has been able to assist others to recognise these qualities in David as well.

### *But I think he is in a good place at the moment.*

David tried many strategies over the years to work out his relationship with his long term partner and to navigate the pain and difficulties of the separation from his children. As he came to trust John he would ring before he allowed his anger to get out of control and,

throughout this difficult, constantly changing time, David learned from John how to slow down his thinking, to become more rational in his responses and to react differently. Whilst this didn't necessarily help him make the best possible choices, John accepts that this might be just the way that it is.

As much of David's story relates to aspects of his personal and domestic life, it is not appropriate to canvas all the events over this period, but John characterises it as moving forward by inches, one step at a time, one issue at a time aiming to meet pressing need and to get things sorted out. John's reflections reveal that the two men had both very functional discussions about getting organised, as well as intimate conversations about personal relationships.

Fairly recently David finally left his relationship with his long term partner (without resort to violence) and has found a new girlfriend with whom he seems to be living very happily. His new partner is outgoing and active which suits David's personality. They have moved more than an hour's travel away to be near her family. He must still make complicated arrangements to see his children, but he is living peacefully and without the sorrow, sadness and confusion of recent years.

This new calm is beneficial for others as well. Recently David was able to independently guide John's young adult son who had reached that stage of being uncertain about whether to stay at or leave his formal education. Looking back with thankfulness that David was able to encourage the young man to stay at school, John is reinforced in his persistent view that in David we find a person of abiding value.

Because of the changes in David's life, the two men do not see each other with the same regularity. John has thought at length about this change and concluded that David is in a good place at the moment. Recently they celebrated David's birthday with a first-for-him meal in an Indian restaurant. John agrees that both have learned a lot about relationships. They have become friends.

### **What does this mean for citizen advocacy?**

John is very thoughtful about his advocacy relationship with David. He is particularly reflective now as David establishes more independence, in a life that takes him away from regular contact with John. These are some of the important points that emerge from his thoughts.

#### *Relationships that grow and change*

The relationship has grown from what John describes as 'an artificial matching process' into an rich, lasting relationship to which both men are deeply committed. He says that, given time, as the troubles shift and as people come to know and trust each other, so does the task orientation of the relationship. This can be confusing at the beginning of the relationship when the challenges are so great, it is important not to become an unpaid support worker. John sought guidance from the Citizen Advocacy Coordinator and his wife when it looked as though he was not doing advocacy but was carrying out other needed functions in David's life. However, over this long and faithful relationship the shift from advocacy task to friendship has demonstrated for John the power of relationships that are given time and support to transform into mutual regard.

### *Advocacy by inches*

The issue of time and duration is crucial in a relationship such as this. It takes time to open up new opportunities for people, to help them to see value in themselves, to set some life goals and use some power to shape their own lives. These outcomes are not guaranteed, but if they are to emerge, being hasty and short-term will not work. Clearly responding to expectations that advocacy become more like short term, easily quantified services, John asserts that counting activities and outcomes could limit the advocacy. 'Advocacy by inches' is what can work, but that it is not easily counted. John is adamant that the lasting effects of advocacy understood in these ways are beneficial, with its value coming from simply helping to 'keep people honest and to have good lives'. He asserts, 'I think personally, I think just the general improvement of society and people interacting with others has got to have huge improvements just for our own psyche and our own belief in each other.'

The other important aspect of duration of the relationship is that although it seems that the everything is bogged down by old problems and fresh challenges, this story of David and John shows how the relationship moves through phases from initial wariness and exploration of roles and expectations, then into a work phase where much is to be changed and fixed and finally into a settling and transforming phase.

### *The importance of focus on fundamental need and vulnerability*

John's passion to do something is driven by an awareness of the level of neglect in the lives of people who become invisible and extremely vulnerable because the combination of the intellectual disability with a failure of services to support them means that their lives become increasingly complicated. John is convinced that Citizen Advocacy needs to maintain its focus on this population.

### *The importance of loyalty*

As well as these thoughts, the story of these two men reveals the enduring power of loyalty – at all times John refused to see David in the often devaluing ways that others depicted him. John also sees this as crucial to walking beside the person, not ahead of them. He came to see that taking things slowly, not giving up in despair and remaining open to working with David's strengths was going to be good for them all. At times, John was the only person who could see that David was shaped by life experiences and circumstances. But he was clear that he needed to take things at David's pace. As well as getting support and encouragements in this, John was also supported by other advocates connected to the program.

In conclusion, as David enters into a new period of independence with the full knowledge that his capacity has developed from his relationship with John, their story reveals the paradox of attachment – it is only when we are truly valued and honoured by a person who has freely given of their time and their concern that we can learn to fly!