

Community Comment, April 14th, 2014

By Jon Sapper

Working with Our Disabled Children

I take my hat off to those individuals who are dedicating their lives helping the most vulnerable, challenged and medically fragile disabled children, youth and young adults in our community. These skilled, compassionate and patient people provide a full range of support: education support including training to achieve basic communication, mobility training to help the disabled achieve the greatest independence possible while learning to live and function successfully in our community and medical support, including life sustaining and basic hygiene services.

The staff at Glen Paul School in Eureka, special programs in our schools throughout the county and community partners operate with the belief and fundamental principle that all children can learn, that all children have value and can contribute in our community and that all children regardless of their disability have the right to an education to reach their individual potential in a dignified manner.

Fifty years ago, many of these children were institutionalized and put in state hospitals without the ability for them to achieve their potential, even if that potential may not be as far reaching as those who do not share some of those disabling conditions. We've come a long way. But, it's different in other parts of the world.

Last week, four visitors from Russia came to Humboldt County. The visit was arranged by Dr. Kim Baureidel from Eureka with the assistance of local Rotary clubs and Rotary International. An interpreter and three physicians spent 10 days meeting with educators, medical professionals and others in our community who work with disabled children and young adults. They were here to observe how our disabled children are provided opportunities to be engaged in our community and reach their potential. Through their current medical model, most disabled children are being sent to institutions with limited support and their life's opportunities pre-determined.

These physicians wanted to see if there was another way to do this work instead of institutionalization. After ten days, they left enlightened (their word), with excitement and a stated commitment that they have a lot to do when they return to their country. I believe, and more importantly, they believe this experience was the first step in changing a long standing history and culture in how they work with the disabled.

Sincere gratitude and compliments to our educators, medical professionals and others in our community who work tirelessly and many times, behind the scenes in providing tremendous support and services to those most in need. The time they took to show our visitors from Russia what we do, will truly have far reaching impact.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.