

Loyalty to Protégé

by Donna Rhall, reprinted from *Citizen Advocate*, the newsletter of Ryde-Hunters Hill Citizen Advocacy, Denistone East, NSW, Australia, Vol.1, Issue 13, June, 1997.

Loyalty to Protégé . . . a principle of love.

Our fickleness as human beings often means that our loyalties can be swayed by sweeter winds of promise when the going gets tough. To stand true to ourselves and for others requires an inner strength and commitment that is steadfast in the face of confrontation and adversity. It involves risk which is often too high a price for us to pay.

Anyone with even the remotest connection to Citizen Advocacy will have heard the word "loyalty" and most probably the term "loyalty to protégé." So easily as a coordinator I can often pass over its significance when speaking to people, yet its impact on a person is *life-changing*.

Citizen advocates are quite unashamedly asked to commit their loyalty to one person with intellectual disability—to see the world from another person's perspective and to walk in his or her shoes for a while.

At times I have asked an advocate to be a lone voice of representation and to stand as a positive referee for a person whose very identity as a human being has been lost after years of negative labelling.

For each of us in our lives there are numerous stakeholders: family; friends; carers; service providers; bureaucratic systems of government and our local community network. All of which have their rightful place and which can bring about incredible possibilities for good. Yet it is from all of these that advocates are asked to stand apart for a person with intellectual disability—to align themselves with one person; to be partisan to him or her and to focus on their interest without conflict.

Recently an advocate confronted a young man's family about the way in which they were treating him. They dumped their broken electrical goods and unwanted rubbish in his house and

convinced him that these items were valuable assets and should not be thrown away. The result, of course, was that his house resembled a rubbish tip. Robert put himself in Stephen's shoes and soon realised that the family was merely trying to appease Stephen and keep him out of their way. They gave him their trash to keep him busy rather than spending quality time with him, teaching him much needed skills to live alone.

Robert believed that Stephen deserved to be treated in a manner that upheld his dignity as a man and in a way that reflected Stephen's inherent value. Stephen's family have stopped dumping on him and have come to recognise through Robert, that their actions were not in Stephen's best interest.

All of us in our lives desire to have people who will treat us kindly and who will not abandon us. A Hebrew word that intertwines these two elements is *hesed*—simply translated into English as "unfailing love."

Many people with disabilities are often rejected by others and constantly have their limitations and deficiencies highlighted. Many have no one to recognise the gifts and strengths they bring to the community. There is often no person who will help them discover their true identity or assist them to take their rightful place in society.

As a movement, Citizen Advocacy is "others" centred, encouraging us all to become a little less selfish and more concerned for our neighbours with disabilities. It gives advocates an opportunity to offer a person with intellectual disability an element of relationship that is authentic and challenging. Advocates become allies for people with no one to represent or defend them; protectors for people who are being abused and exploited; friends and family to those who have been abandoned.

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Loyalty is not a half-hearted offering made by mere acquaintances. It is not a wishy wash concept that evokes warm fuzzy feelings or something that is given only occasionally. You cannot be loyal to a person *sometimes*—that is not the nature of loyalty. It is a decision of the heart, practiced by the will and endorsed by passion and selflessness.

When another person becomes the centre of our actions and decisions and we see the world through their eyes, we have achieved much, not only for them, but also for ourselves and our community.

In our program, it is the advocates who tell it like it is:

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"I've got to be there for him, he has no one else who cares."

"He needs someone to dot the *i*'s for him and that person is me."

"I love her like a sister and will do everything I can in my power to make it right for her."

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"No one matters like her . . ."

Loyalty is one of the greatest gifts we can give one another in this life. It is a commitment *to* and a belief *in* another person, no matter the cost to our reputation or infringement on our own lives. It is that selfless desire to see the best in and for those around us. Simply, it is an empowering principle of love and the most significant principle of Citizen Advocacy.

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