



IN REACH, INC.
*helping adolescent and older youth
reach their potential*

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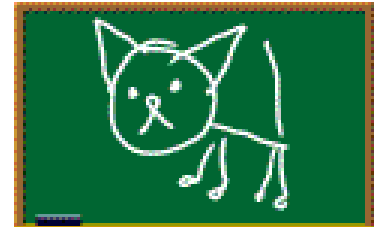
REVEALED!

Community-based organizations, educators, county officials and others helping young people pursue and achieve excellence in Prince George's County, Maryland

"SPECIAL" STUDENTS

Welcome to another issue of **REVEALED!** For this issue, I had the fortune of interviewing individuals who are living with a physical disability and/or working with students with "special" needs—physical and "invisible" disabilities (learning disabilities). I became aware of the enormity and complexities of this issue when I began working with children in an after school environment and substitute teaching a few years ago. Specifically, I was amazed at three things.

1. The number of students who have some type of "special" need and taking prescribed medication.
2. The number of students who have been identified as learning disabled, with parents not willing to utilize recommended additional services; and
3. How difficult it is to work in any classroom setting where there are students with disabilities without the proper supports.



From the interviews, I learned that the term "special" when used in education is misleading and does not serve those it has been used to label, that there is far too little community awareness and support for individuals with any disability, and that additional dialogue and partnerships between the disabled and non-disabled community need to be created in order for all of us to progress.

In Impromptu, **IN REACH** engaged high school students in a brief dialogue about their feelings on interacting with students with "special" needs and found their responses revealing, but not really surprising. After each interview, I asked myself, how can **IN REACH** make a difference through the design of its programs for "special" adolescents and older youths living with physical and "invisible" disabilities and those without?

Our advocacy for the improvement of public education, must responsibly include all children, youth and families.

RECOGNIZE THIS!

Erika Twitty

Born in Washington, D.C. and raised in Prince George's County, Maryland, Erika graduated from Bowie State University in 2002 and is looking forward to one day attaining a Ph.D. in Psychology with a concentration in child and adolescent behavior. Erika has Cerebral Palsy, which for her is more of a mobility issue. She can do most things for herself and functions well. Cerebral Palsy occurs when there is not enough oxygen to the brain and affect people differently.

Q: What have your experiences been like as a young person with a physical disability?

I do not have a problem making friends. People stare some, but once they get to know me they do not appear to notice my disability as much. Most stares are from younger children.

I believe one advantage that I have had is that the people I entered elementary school with I went all the way through to high school with. In elementary school, the counselor helped facilitate the process for children to become accustomed to seeing someone with a disability.

Q: What would you tell someone about individuals with disabilities?

Recently, I spoke at a graduation for the Ideal Academy. My speech was about how to get along in college with a disability. I spoke about how having a disability in the college environment is different than in high school because you have to tell people what you need. I told the students that the most important thing to remember is that just because you have a disability it does not mean that you cannot do anything. You will have to overcome a lot more, but do not feel like your life is over. Use it for good—to educate and inspire other people. God only gives people certain things, things they can handle, to be able to use to do good. I reminded them that **you can overcome this and use it for the good**. My strong Christian background has also helped me.

Q: How did you become involved in the Maryland Leadership Forum?

During eleventh grade, one of my teachers told me that she nominated me for the Maryland Youth Leadership Forum. I viewed it as an opportunity to gain additional leadership skills, learn to advocate for my disability, build confidence, and as a way to form a support system that would allow me to make friends for a lifetime.

Q: List three things public school officials and educators can do to make education more inclusive for students with disabilities.

1. Ask students what they need and want. Students can tell you.
2. More funding to effectively teach children with disabilities.
3. Not everyone learns the same way. There needs to be different approaches to teaching.

Q: What advice do you have for parents of children with disabilities?

My advice for parents of children with disabilities is to encourage your children no matter what they want to do. Be their backbone, they will need it. Please support them.

Try to instill in children at a young age that they need to believe in something—it helps. Believing in yourself and a higher power is half the battle. An extra push to some place that they can draw energy from, especially if the parents are not there.

Q: What can communities do to make programs more inclusive of all children especially those with disabilities?

Programs to educate children about people with disabilities. Most individuals with disabilities just want to be accepted. We need to help close the friendship gap. This would help a lot. We need buddy programs between disabled and none disabled students. A lot could be learned on both sides especially for people without disabilities. Partnering will help. On a higher level, show more advertisements and commercials with people with disabilities. I prefer not to use the term disabled because everyone has a disability, physical limitations.

A DIALOGUE WITH Catherine Raggio MARYLAND YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM

I am always looking for a way to share my knowledge and how to incorporate creative programming ideas in programs.

In late summer 2004, IN REACH sat down to talk with the leader of this important forum for students with disabilities.

Tell me all about the Maryland Youth Leadership Forum.

The program was developed in California. I was trained there and brought it back for the state to replicate.

- The Maryland Youth Leadership Forum is a freestanding program, not a nonprofit. Its lead sponsor is the Maryland State Department of Education and others committed to youth with disabilities.
- It is only for rising 11th & 12th graders.
- It is a 4-day event usually held in July and requires lots of preparation. In 2004, we held our fifth Forum. At least, twenty-five to thirty students attend each year.
- There is an application process similar to applying to the National Honor Society and requires references, an essay, school transcript, and a resume.
- Students with all types of disabilities attend the Forum. We will provide whatever accommodations or assistance they need, including sign language interpreters, personal care aides and scribes. Students with invisible disabilities such as learning disabilities, often find the Forum to be a liberating experience. They are able to acknowledge their need for assistance with some activities without the fear of being teased by peers.
- The greatest need for the Forum is to have funding to hire a full-time employee to coordinate youth programming. We have lots of good ideas. We would like to implement an on-going mentoring/student match effort. We have also organized one day reunions around different themes and want to do more of them.

What does the future hold?

We are trying to “build a community within the disability community.” Our greatest challenge is getting the word out and recruiting more students. It is good to see alumni comeback to help. Our first group of students are now twenty-ish. We look to the alumni to serve as role models and mentors.



Ms. Catherine Raggio, executive director, Independence Now, Inc., located in Riverdale, Maryland, is also its founder. Independence Now, a private nonprofit serving Prince George’s and Montgomery Counties, provides services to individuals with disabilities and coordinates the state effort through a steering committee of representatives from the various funding sources. She chairs this committee. She can be reached at 301.277.2839.

Ms. Raggio began her career as a speech therapist. Prior to starting Independence Now, she was the Executive Director of the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council. Under her leadership, the Council initiated family support services and school inclusion activities.

Ms. Raggio had polio as a child.



In Our Schools

Dr. Pamela Downing-Hosten is the Director of the Department of Special Education for Prince George's County Public Schools.

Originally from New Jersey, Dr. Downing-Hosten began her career in elementary education. Some of the schools that she has worked at include Bladensburg Elementary School, Nicolas Orem Middle School, and Crossland High School. She has served as a vice principal and compliance officer. This is her twenty-first year working in the Prince George's County Public School System (PGCPS).

Dr. Downing-Hosten received a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Howard University, a Master of Science in Human Development with a concentration in Special Education from George Washington University and her Doctorate in Education Administration from Nova Southeastern in Florida.

Ms. Carol Reed, supervisor K-12 instructional programs, joined us during our telephone interview.

There are over 14,000 special education students in the PGCPS system.

Q: How does the school system determine that a student is in need of special education services?

Principals and general education teachers use a number of instructional strategies. If a child continues to have difficulties after initial efforts, a multi-disciplinary team reviews strategies to come up with other recommendations to determine what additional information is needed to rule out certain disabilities. The child's teacher, a special educator, psychologist, and parents participate in the assessment process. After which, all data is reviewed to determine whether the student actually has a disability.

Q: Which of the coded disabilities do most of our special needs students fall under?

A specific learning disability, then speech language impairments, and there is a tie between health impaired and multi-disabilities.

Q: What services are available to these students and their families?

The Procedure Safeguard and Parental Rights Document outlines parents and family's rights and IDEA 97 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) outlines certain provisions and related services that can be assessed.

Q: Does the school system partner with any community organizations, businesses, etc. to provide services to students with special needs and their families? If so, how?

Sure. We work with several organizations such as the ARC of Prince George's County, the Special Education Citizen Advisory Commission and we have partnerships with the University of Maryland, Johns Hopkins, Bowie State and George Washington University to provide teacher training. We also work with the Maryland Parks and Planning Commission.

Q: How could community-based organizations work with schools to offer programs and services to students with special needs and their families?

We need more adult volunteers to work with students in the classroom to reduce the student-teacher ratio.

Q: What are the three greatest challenges currently facing special education services in Prince George's County?

We are in the process of realigning resources to meet student's needs more effectively and efficiently. The three greatest challenges currently facing us right now are:

#1 Recruiting and retaining staff. We are constantly in need of high quality staff familiar with special and general education services and supports.

#2 Aligning programs that are close to students' homes. Right now programs are spread out. We are working to move students closer to their neighbor-

I would like to see more socialization programs for students in the community, especially for non-disabled families.

hood school and home. This is a major task.

#3 *Moving students toward full participation in No Child Left Behind.* Many students in special education perform far below grade level, but we have to give students access to the appropriate grade level materials. For instance, a sixth grade student working on Kindergarten level must be instructed on their level which may be challenging for a teacher when there are students performing on multi levels in one classroom.

Q: What types of programs would you like to see offered in the community to these students and their families?

I would like to see more socialization programs for students in the community, especially for non-disabled families. We need extensions to provide enrichment and tutorial programs. These types of programs provide a positive adjunct.

Q: What is the single greatest thing an individual can do to help a student with special needs become successful?

Believe in that student. Believe that the student can be successful. Have high expectations. Do not limit the student to ones own beliefs. Be creative and do whatever it takes to ensure that student becomes successful.



Impromptu

An interview with non-disabled students.
All in the eleventh grade. All members of In Reach's Youth Leadership Council.

What are your thoughts about interacting with students with disabilities?

CB: Supervision is important.

TG: Depends on severity (of disability). Northwestern has a Special Olympics pep rally.

TS: I have a friend that I play sports with that has a learning disability.

Do you know any students with disabilities?

One of Northwestern's football players, Joshua Lewis, was paralyzed a year ago playing football. They all know him.

TS is familiar with Melwood, a unique community asset located in Prince George's County, offering job training, employment, community living, leisure and travel opportunities for people with developmental disabilities throughout Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

Name disabilities you are aware of.

Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome . . .

Do you think that there are enough programs available for students with disabilities?

TG: No. There are not enough for students without disabilities. We need more youth leadership programs. We need more seminars and public speaking opportunities.

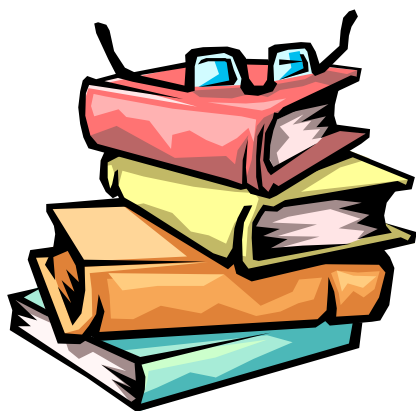
CB: We need decent community centers.

As a student without disabilities, how comfortable would you feel about being approached by a student with a disability?

TG: I think I would feel uncomfortable in a friendship situation. As an associate maybe, but not a friend. I could be sociable. I feel least threatened by individuals with physical disabilities.

JS: Depends on the disability and capability of the person. ■

ON OUR SHELVES . . . *AND THEIRS*



Taking Charge: Teenagers Talk About Life & Physical Disabilities, Kay Harris Kriegsman, Elinor L. Zaslow, Jennifer D'Zmura-Rechsteiner

Covers such topics as independence, self-esteem, relationships, and sexuality from the perspective of teenagers with various physical disabilities.

No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement Joseph P. Shapiro

Centered on our society's relations to its disabled population on the 1992 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, No Pity documents the political progress of the issue with stories about several of the nation's estimated 35 million disabled people. Included are polio-afflicted activists, Special Olympics competitors, armed services veterans and elderly people

who owe their survival to medical and technological advances. While Shapiro cites encouraging signs of progress made in the advance of their rights, he notes that disabled people still struggle to be accepted on equal, independent terms without being patronized, segregated or victimized in an antiquated social services system and a prejudiced society.

Learning a Living: A Guide to Planning Your Career and Finding a Job for People With Learning Disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder, and Dyslexia, Dale S. Brown

A career guide written for people with learning disabilities by someone with firsthand experience! Learning a Living, on the subject of careers and the challenges of learning disabilities, discusses everything a person with learning disabilities needs to know in order to find a job that uses their strengths and minimizes the effects of their disability. This comprehensive book addresses career issues for high schoolers, college students, and adults with learning disabilities, dyslexia, and attention deficit disorder. Topics include: assessing strengths and weaknesses; educational options; resume writing; interviewing skills; accommodations on the job; mentors; and networking.

Learning Outside the Lines, Jonathan Mooney and David Cole

Learning with *YOUR* purpose in mind -- not your parents', not your teacher's, not your school's. Every day, your school, your teachers, and even your peers draw lines to measure and standardize intelligence. They decide what criteria make one person smart and another person stupid. They decide who will succeed and who will just get by. Learning Outside the Lines helps people with disabilities find their norm, because they learn differently, and identify systems that consistently supports their ability and desire to learn.

Working with Challenging Parents of Students with Special Needs, Jean Cheng Gorman

This book fills the gap of how to handle difficult parents, especially parents of special needs children. It focuses on both dealing with specific problems and cultivating strong relationships with parents. It will help you learn how to understand the parents' perspective while arming yourself with methods to address their concerns and move beyond conflict to collaboration. It is easy to read and offers excellent strategies for working with all parents. Chapters include Generating Alliances , Not Lawsuits; Dealing with Denial; Dealing with Nonparticipation and Resistance; and a resource section with drafts of parents, intake, and conference letters and many other useful materials. A must to add to your shelf if you work with children and their parents in any setting.

Handbook of Learning Disabilities edited by H. Lee Swanson, Karen R. Harris and Steve Graham

A comprehensive resource for scholars, students, and practitioners who want to understand in detail the research, theory and practices about learning disabilities. Very comprehensive and pedagogic.

ISSUE TO WATCH

Inclusive programs for disabled and non-disabled students

Mentioned throughout the issue and in every interview, there is a great need for additional programming that brings disabled and non disabled individuals together.

The **Youth Empowerment Alliance**, a project of the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, is one of a limited number of organizations that work to promote, advocate and create programs to heighten the awareness of and provide support services for children and youth with disabilities.

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council advocates for public policy and supportive practices and opportunities that promote the full inclusion of all people with developmental disabilities in community life. In *Inclusive Education in Maryland: A Blueprint for Change*, a report on the least restrictive environments for students with developmental disabilities receiving special education services in Maryland, writers present compelling research highlighting the positive effects of inclusive educational settings. Download report at www.md-council.org.

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IN REACH believes that young people should always be *in reach* of a quality education, opportunities in their community for development, and ultimately, their dreams.

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Please designate **IN REACH** in your workplace giving drive. **IN REACH** is available to present our programs to workplaces, community organizations and groups and all others interested in our work. Contact Toni Smith at 301.277.2790 or tsmith@inreachinc.org.