



# Sharing the News

Newsletter of the Shared Living Programs of The Polus Center • Summer 2008 • Issue 4

## Wendy Swanson: Honoring Twenty Years of Service

February 8 is a significant date for Wendy Swanson, Program Director of the Shared Living Alliance, one of the Polus Center's Shared Living Programs. It was on that day that she met her husband in 1992 and it is also the day they got married in 1994. And it was on February 8, 1988 that Wendy started working at Transitional Resources, Inc. (TRI), the agency which evolved into the Polus Center. This year marks Wendy's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an employee of the Polus Center.

Reflecting on her tenure at Polus, Wendy spoke of the path her life has taken, both personally and professionally, over the past twenty years. "It's sometimes hard to distinguish between my work life and my home life," she told me. "My whole life revolves around the homes and the people I support. My husband Eric and my daughter Siri, who is nine, are part of a friendship circle which includes my friends at Polus, and family members of home providers and the people I support. I love going into people's homes to talk and share stories and experiences with them."

Wendy has known some of the folks she supports since 1988 when they were living in institutions and Wendy, along with other Polus Center employees, helped with their move into group homes which later became Shared Living households. Fran and Bob are just two of the people she told me about. "I first met Fran when she was living at a special school for people who are blind. She was sitting in a baby pool. It was very sad." Fran eventually moved into a group home under the auspices of TRI and then into a Shared Living home. Fran now lives in Rutland, Mass. with the Jeffrey family and her best friend Ivy. Wendy has seen Fran grow into an accomplished and proud woman who plays the piano at public events and is a regular at Tanglewood.

Wendy met Bob back in 1988 at a facility in Brookline. "He would just sit all day hugging a pillow and hitting himself. His



*Wendy and her daughter Siri at Polus' Thanksgiving Celebration.*

life was pretty empty." Wendy helped him make the move to a group home in Dedham and later to the Beckles' home in Newton where he is an active member of the family. "It gives me so much joy to see Fran and Bob and all of the other folks I have known over the years enjoying such full lives. When I think about all of the challenges they have overcome and all of the ways they have surpassed others' expectations, it makes me very proud to have been part of their story."

Wendy has been in many different job roles at Polus as the direction and needs of the agency have changed. She has been director of the Roxbury Vocational Program, Administrative Coordinator, Human Resources Director and finally Program Director of the Shared Living Alliance, the position she has held for the past ten years.

### Inside This Issue:

- Ski Day III. . . . . 2
- Re-certification. . . . . 3
- Discussion Forum. . . . . 3
- Brian Argabright. . . . . 4
- Congrats to Laurie & Nick . . 4
- Upcoming Events . . . . . 4

Wendy enjoys being part of the Polus Center. She believes in the mission of the agency and values the work it does. She also appreciates the freedom and flexibility she has been given to try new things and to go in new directions. Most of all, Wendy values all of the time she has spent with the people she supports. "I love to bring people together. It makes everything I do worthwhile."

Michael Lundquist, Executive Director of the Polus Center, has worked with Wendy since 1988 and has seen her grow as the mission of TRI and the Polus Center evolved. "Wendy has always been willing to take on new challenges," he told me. "She's caring and conscientious and very dedicated to the people she supports. It's highly unlikely that Polus would be here today if it weren't for Wendy." Joseph Gardner, a consultant and advocate who has worked with Wendy for more than twenty-five years, describes her as "the consummate professional who combines education, experience, and a true sense of commitment to providing the best supports to the individuals and families that she supports. Her long-term friendships are the reason why these homes have been such a success for these many years."

Thank you, Wendy, for everything you have contributed to the Polus Center over the past twenty years: your dedication, knowledge, organizational skills and compassion. Congratulations to you on achieving this milestone! ❁

# Ski Day III: Mountain Adventure

March 4, 2008 – Wachusett Mountain, Princeton, MA

**P**redictions of rainy weather on Ski Day, the Polus Center's annual mountain-top adventure are not welcome. All were delighted when the predictions proved to be wrong and the slopes stayed dry and snowy until late afternoon after everybody had thoroughly enjoyed their day on the slopes and were packing up their gear to head home.

Sixty people attended Ski Day III, representing all of the Polus Center's Shared Living programs. Delores and Keion from Roxbury, Susan, April and Shyla from Salem, Maggie, Tammy and Nick from Somerville, John, Gerry and Patricia from Worcester and Brian from Randolph are just some of the folks who traveled to Princeton to take part in Polus' traditional Winter Celebration.

This year, first time skiers like April as well as seasoned pros like Sandra, Pat and Holly were given the opportunity to take a chair lift up the mountain in addition to skiing on the beginner slopes. April and Pat were two individuals making use of adaptive equipment who took to the slopes in a big way. Safely secured into a ski sled, they were accompanied by one of Wachusett's wonderful skiing instructors on the Monadnock Triple Chair Lift that took them to the summit of Indian Summer Trail. That's when the fun started. Pat could be heard yelling with joy as she careened down the mountain. April was all smiles when she got to the bottom. Both women wanted to repeat the adventure and they did! Twice!

The Granite Lodge, located right next to the Indian Summer Trail, was the place to be for folks coming back from a run down the mountain and for those who enjoyed the opportunity to play games and visit with friends. The refreshments were



Left to right: Pat, Tiffany, Sandra, Laurie, and Holly enjoying themselves at Ski Day.



April is getting ready for another run up the mountain

fabulous – they were reason enough to make the trip to Wachusett!

Thanks to all who came to Ski Day III. We're looking forward to seeing you next year and hope for even a larger turnout as more and more of our Polus family experience the fun of a mountain adventure. ❁

## The Polus Center for Social & Economic Development Shared Living Programs

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## Polus is Re-certified by DMR – “with distinction”

**E**very two years, organizations funded through DMR are required to participate in a survey and certification process called QUEST, an evaluation process that is the basis for certifying (and thereby allowing) them to receive DMR support. Agencies are licensed based upon the quality of supports and the ability to impact on the quality of people's lives in areas including health, safety, rights and dignity, relationships, community connections, individual control, and growth and accomplishments.<sup>a</sup> Polus participated in this process in March, and nine randomly selected homes were visited in Boston, Worcester, and the Merrimack Valley. As a result of these efforts, which were lead by Shared Living Supervisor Laurie Sault, we were awarded a Certification with Distinction in April, which means that we received an “achieved” in all quality of life areas and organizational outcomes. Thanks to all of the households who participated in the QUEST process.

We were pleased to read in the final report that what the surveyors were most impressed with about Polus was our focus on relationships, people's authentic participation in community life, our person-centered and individualized approach, and the meaningful ways in which our extended Polus families spend time together—in addition to the fact that safeguards and oversight is in place. “Each of these households gave people opportunities to share experiences with their providers and take part in family life in ways that were unique to them,” said Kevin Layden, the Team Leader of the survey. “The relationships and trust that have developed make for a natural integration into family life and encourages individual growth.”

This reflection process provided us with an invaluable self-assessment to help us continue to evolve, grow, and learn how to become even better. We celebrated some of the newer initiatives such as the Polus-wide community events, the provider training forums, and communication vehicles such as this newsletter! We also identified many areas we could improve, such as helping family members and guardians feel more a part of the Polus community and establishing or strengthening our advisory boards.

The very name Polus means “striving for the ideal, the best we can be.” We do this

on so many levels, and QUEST is just one lens from which we assess ourselves. We need to consider this perspective cautiously, and know that we must be attentive to these types of important safeguards while not losing our vision and principles of supporting-homes in a way that is as non-invasive and non-bureaucratic as possible. As a long-time consultant to Polus Center Michael Kendrick notes,<sup>b</sup> the ultimate litmus test of our success is the extent to which

people thrive, and they are the best judges of what that means to them. “People supported are quite aware of what they have found to be important, of what is trivial and what is profound. They know the importance of attitudes and values, of listening more deeply, of being open to hidden potentials, of commitment and loyalty, of empowerment, of social inclusion, of dreaming, and of the constancy of people in your life. They often have clear ideas about how organizations could and should assist.”

One of our ongoing goals is to strengthen the ways that everyone of us can participate in helping Polus continue to grow and learn and become the best that we can be. Please always feel free to let us know what you think. We're listening. ❁

### Endnotes

a Health and Human Services, *Quick Guide to the Licensure and Certification Process*, www.mass.gov.

b Michael J. Kendrick, *Creating the Right Conditions for Thriving: The Place for a Specific Ecology for Personalized Initiatives*, Occasional Paper Series, Safeguards Initiative, CRU Publications, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, 2004.



Front row: Althea Henderson, Jack Powers, Wendy Swanson. Back row: Laurie Sault, Theresa Kane, Jan Doody.

## DISCUSSION FORUM: The Fine Art of Belonging

This past winter, Home Providers gathered to discuss a very important topic that impacts all of our lives: belonging and relationships. As always, the providers who attended the forums – held in Worcester, Amesbury and Dorchester – enjoyed each others' company as they participated in a spirited discussion on how to assist the people they share their lives with to experience true belonging in their communities. One of the benefits of Shared Living is that everybody involved in the household has the opportunity to expand their network of community connections. Developing and maintaining these connections is not always easy, however, and the forums gave providers the chance to share their successes and challenges.

We began each Forum with an exercise. Each of us wrote down the names of people in our lives with whom we have a relationship – close relationships such as family members and dear friends as well as people we do business with, etc. Next we made a list of people in the lives of the folks we support through Shared

Living. In comparing the lists, we noticed that the people we support tend to have more people in their lives who are in paid roles and may not have a large network of friends or family. We reflected on how important it is to have relationships with many people in different roles. Relationships help keep us safe, help us feel good about ourselves, provide us with practical assistance and companionship. If most of our relationships were with paid staff, we would not feel as connected or worthwhile.

So, how to help people become more connected? This part of the discussion focused on talking about successes and obstacles. Many providers have experienced success to helping people become active and valued members of church communities. Others have been able to reconnect people with their parents, brothers and sisters. Most providers have introduced the person they support to their own network of neighbors, family and friends. ❁

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## Brian Argabright: Succeeding at CVS

Brian Argabright was polite and enthusiastic as he gave me a tour of The CVS Pharmacy in Randolph where he has been employed for the past five years. He knows the store by heart – all 16 aisles of it. “This job keeps me really busy,” he told me. Brian works about six hours a week and takes care of inside and outside maintenance. That means he maintains the aisles and the break room as well as the parking lot. He also replaces return items, carries heavy items from the storeroom and helps with neatening stock on the shelves, called “facing”. He also helps customers with their questions. “I do it all!” he exclaimed proudly.

Brian receives support from Commonwealth Business Associates, a project of the Polus Center. Althea Henderson, Brian’s support person, visits him regularly to see how his job is going. Althea is impressed by Brian’s many skills, his big heart and his ability to relate to customers and co-workers. “He’s a really great guy,” she said. “He’s very capable and responsible.”

Brian introduced me to Mary Ellen, his shift supervisor. As we approached her, Brian whispered that Mary Ellen was going to say nice things about him and he was right. “We always look forward to Brian coming in,” she gushed. “He does such a great job and somehow manages to get everything done in three hours! Everyone loves him. He’s so helpful and hard working.” Everyone I spoke to at CVS reiterated Mary Ellen’s words. Brian is a valued employee and recently received the gift of a beautiful pen for working at the store for five years.

The Randolph CVS is a busy place and



Brian Argabright conducting a tour at CVS.

is open 24 hours a day, every day. Brian admitted that sometimes it is mind-boggling with so many new things for sale and so many people coming and going. And of course the store becomes very hectic during the holidays. But Brian manages to deal with the crowds and the extra demands. For him, it’s all part of the job. And it is why his co-workers and customers think so highly of him.

When Brian showed up to work on June 23, several co-workers asked him if he had noticed the big electronic sign outside the store. He hadn’t so he went outside to check it out. It read “Happy Birthday Brian!” The store’s manager, John Dizok, had programmed the sign in honor of Brian.

“That made working on my birthday not such a bad thing after all!” he told me with a grin.

Congratulations, Brian, for all of your achievements. I hope the CVS sign is lit up for many birthdays to come. ❁

### Upcoming Events

#### Thursday, September 18, 2008

6:00 – 8:00 p.m. OPEN HOUSE **A Gathering for Guardians and Family Members.** Join us at our office at **240 A Elm St., Suite 23, in Somerville** for an informal get together for family members and guardians of the folks who live in the Polus Center’s Shared Living programs. Meet and mingle with Polus staff and other parents and guardians. Refreshments will be served. For more information, please contact Jan Doody at 978-724-3361.

#### Friday, September 26, 2008

9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. WORKSHOP **Supporting the Development of Freely Given Relationships.** **Speaker:** Tom Doody of North Quabbin Citizen Advocacy. **Location:** Holyoke Community College, Holyoke, MA. Cost: \$50.00. For more information: Call Jim Brunault at 413-788-6981, ext.209. Interested Home Providers: Please speak to your Program Director if you are interested in attending.

#### Wednesday, October 22, 2008

10:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. DISCUSSION FORUM for Central Mass. Community Network Home Providers. **Topic: “How to Advocate Effectively for the People We Support.”** **Location:** CMCN Office, 255 Park Ave., Worcester. RSVP to Laurie or Patricia, at 508-752-8129.

#### Thursday, October 23, 2008

10:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. DISCUSSION FORUM for North Shore Shared Living Home Providers. **Topic: “How to Advocate Effectively for the People We Support.”** **Location:** NSSL Conference room, 110 Haverhill Rd., Amesbury. RSVP to Jack at 978-388-0738.

#### Saturday, November 8, 2008

11:00 AM – 12:30 PM: DISCUSSION FORUM for Shared Living Alliance and Greater Boston Community Network Home Providers. **Topic: “How to Advocate Effectively for the People We Support.”** **Location:** All Souls Church, Braintree, MA. Please RSVP to Wendy at 781-837-8615 or to Althea at 617-591-1274. *Please note: This forum will be part of the Fall Gathering for SLA households. Home Providers throughout the Boston area are welcome to attend.*

Providers acknowledged that there are many obstacles to helping people become accepted into their communities. After generating quite a long list, we decided that one of the key obstacles is fear. Family members may fear the person will not be safe by joining a community group or working at a real job in the community. Providers may fear what the public will say or do to the person they support. We may fear going beyond our “comfort zone”, such as attending a group meeting for the first time or going someplace new. Fear of rejection affects all of us and has a real impact on our willingness to take risks when we are helping someone become active in the community. We all shared examples of times we had taken risks. The results ranged from being pleasantly surprised at the ease of attending a neighborhood block party and having the person fit right in to the not-so-successful experience of getting rained on at an outdoor concert and forgetting where you had parked. We agreed that after every experience – good or bad – it is helpful to reflect on what went well, what the problems were, how to prevent them next time and most importantly, to not give up.

We at the Polus Center believe that communities are made better by the presence of people with disabilities and that they have much to offer. In this spirit, we will continue to help people become active members of their communities and will continue our efforts to support providers in overcoming obstacles and celebrating successes. If you have a story of successful community integration to share, please contact Jan doody at 978-724-3361, [jdoody@poluscenter.org](mailto:jdoody@poluscenter.org).

### Congratulations to Laurie and Nick! Polus Center Directors Graduate from Provider Council Programs

Laurie Sault, Program Director for the Central Mass Community Network and The Polus Center Shared Living Supervisor, and Nick Brightman, Director of Finance and Administration, both completed year-long programs offered by the Provider’s Council in June. Laurie received a Certificate in Community

Human Service Management from Clark University and Nick received a Certificate in Nonprofit Administration and Finance from Suffolk University. The certificate programs include classes on nonprofit management, human resources, legal issues, financial management, entrepreneurial nonprofits, program evaluation and fundraising. Congratulations, Laurie and Nick! ❁