



Katherine Woronko and one of her circle of friends, Rita Lipani

Artwork by Martha Perske

Becoming 'Regular' Kids

Dreams can become reality through inclusive education.

By Marsha Forest, Jeff Strully and Stan Woronko

Two young women were labeled as profoundly retarded. They were thought of by some as being at the "bottom of the heap." Today they enjoy the lives of regular teenagers — with all the pain and joy this entails.

Although neither uses words to communicate, they have told us with their hearts and souls what they need.

Neither can always go to the bathroom or eat without assistance. Neither can do advanced math or even read. But both are brilliant social policy creators.

They have told us clearly that they need

to belong and to be loved. Each has said, "I won't learn until I am loved."

Shawntell Strully in Littleton, Colorado, and Katherine Woronko in Ontario, Canada, are part of a growing trend called the *regular education initiative*. This involves families and professionals who want all children to go to their regular neighborhood schools alongside their brothers and sisters, to have friends and to learn as much as they can.

Both the Woronkos and the Strullys feel that the single most important issue facing all parents is their child's safety and

protection from exploitation, abuse, neglect and mistreatment. At the same time, these parents want their daughters to be active, involved and included and to have a dynamic quality of life.

What Shawntell's parents want

"The only way we can think of ensuring our daughter's protection and future is by surrounding her with a group of people who want to be in her life," say Jeff and Cindy Strully. "We fear her being surrounded by paid people who don't really know or love her — people who won't see her talents, gifts and

abilities but who will write 20-page IEPs about what she can't or won't do.

"Our major concerns are not whether Shawntell holds a job, is fully toilet trained, has tongue lateralization or can make three purchases in a supermarket. What we do want is to make sure she has company on a Saturday evening and has people around her simply because they like her and she likes them.

"The only way we can think for this to happen is for Shawntell to grow up in a family of her own, to live in a community where people can get to know her, to go to the regular school with everyone else and to be part of regular classes and school life.

"Full inclusion will not happen if Shawntell is an outsider. It will not come from special education. It will come from her friends."

Today Shawntell attends a regular high school and has an active circle of 15 to 18 girls who get together regularly to figure out how to support one another.

Common sense

What families like this need is an *integration facilitator* — a teacher whose job is to introduce people with retardation back into the real world, to connect with others and to build a new community. This means a major change in roles and will be a challenge to school systems everywhere.

If we wait for schools to be *ready* for individuals with challenging behaviors, though, we'll have to wait till hell freezes over.

The first placement in a school is the toughest. After that, it's usually easy to include others. The maximum for the average school is about 12 placements.

Having it all

We want to be clear. We are not saying that socialization is the end all and be all. We are saying that the development of real friends over time for all people with challenging needs is possible. It will not happen through wishing, miracles or osmosis. It will happen with a conscious plan of action and with teachers, parents and school administrators who are committed to the notion that it *can* happen.

Why can quality integrated education happen in certain places in Canada and the United States and not in others? The answer has nothing to do with money, but everything to do with values. If a school system truly values inclusion and diversity, then Shawntell and Katherine will be included and valued.

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You can't learn to like kids with disabilities by watching puppets. Puppets aren't real. They don't smell or drool. Kids learn to accept people with differences by really living with them.

However, having friends is not all there is to do at school. We think Katherine and Shawntell should "have it all." This means having a job after school and on weekends. It means going to the mall to shop with friends. It means learning to pick a video they like — even if they know their parents will hate it.

It does not mean going to a job far from school for one to three days a week at age 13. It does not mean spending the school day shopping with four nontalking kids while regular students take gym. It does not mean constantly doing things with adults who try to teach you what they think is useful for you.

Change may not come easily. Take the changes made when Katherine was a teen.

The Woronko story

Born July 9, 1971, Katherine was a happy, healthy baby but developed a severe developmental disability after injections for whooping cough.

Desperate by 1983, the Woronkos placed Katherine in a group home with the hope that she would benefit from the structured environment and behavior management techniques. She was programmed with *differential reinforcement* and *positive practice*. She also attended a segregated school nearby.

Stan wasn't satisfied. At first, he just wanted a better quality program than the school offered. However, after hearing a talk by the principal of an integrated school system, Stan realized what he really wanted was for Katherine to get out of the segregated life style altogether.

A new way of thinking

In 1984, Stan and Marthe attended a course for parents led by Judith Snow and Marsha Forest. Here Katherine's parents spoke of their new vision of regular school and community life for her. Here their hopes and dreams were accepted and validated. Here stories were told. Here parents and professionals laughed and cried together. Here plans were made to build new futures. Here hope was reborn.

Stan and Marthe looked for ways to set their lives on a new track. After a lengthy and difficult struggle with one school board, the family was ecstatic when another school board accepted Katherine in the local high school. In September of 1986, Katherine entered the doors of St. Robert's High School in Richmond Hill,

Ontario, with all the rest of the 14-year-olds in her neighborhood.

A circle of friends

Through a grant obtained by Marsha Forest, Annmarie Ruttimann was hired jointly by the school and Marsha to be the integration facilitator for Katherine.

Planning always involved the family. The initial goal was that by December Katherine would have a circle of at least six friends. First the foundation would be built. Katherine would get to know her new environment, and her tour guides and connectors would be her peers. Annmarie's job would be to make this happen.

Katherine began to blossom. Within one month major changes could be seen in her behavior. Objectives that highly trained behavior specialists could never seem to achieve were realized with the creativity of Annmarie and Katherine's growing circle of friends.

Instead of spending her mornings starting into space or monotonously twisting objects back and forth, Katherine was doing aerobics and weightlifting. She was attending regular academic classes and even some dances.

Although she still did not talk, she used hand signs to signal certain needs.

All this did not happen without a lot of work, time, energy and commitment. The key, however, was Annmarie's unflagging love and belief in Katherine and her family. The school was skeptical, neutral, watching. But no one could deny that Katherine was learning, growing and changing beyond the wildest dreams of anyone involved.

By March 1986, Katherine had improved enough to move back home with her family.

This January her family, professionals and teen friends helped her decide where and how to spend her next five years.

Katherine and Shawntell have shown us that full inclusion is possible. It is now up to the rest of us to build circles of friends around those we love.

Dr. Marsha Forest is director of education, Frontier College, Toronto. Jeff Strully is executive director of ARC-Colorado. Stan Woronko's credentials include being the father of Katherine and Stefan.

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