

CHOICES

Winter 2013

7th Annual iMatter Conference a Success!

Special thanks to our Keynote Speaker: Keith Gardner, Chief of Staff to the Governor of New Mexico, Suzanna Martinez



Community Options, Inc. provides housing and employment support to people with disabilities.

Philosophy: All persons, regardless of their level of disability, can and should live and work in the community with dignity, choice, and self-determination.

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The figures of Community Options, Inc. (COI) are constantly changing. As it stands right now, COI employs about 3,000 staff members in 35 offices with a budget that is quite rapidly approaching \$100 million. However, throughout the years since the founding of COI in 1989, the mission has remained the same- to provide housing and employment supports for people with disabilities. Robert Stack, President and CEO of Community Options, Inc., was happy to proclaim this at the 7th Annual iMatter Conference in San Antonio, Texas, during his welcome speech on November 12, 2012. He told everyone in attendance that COI carries out its mission “with unflappable conviction, unapologetic pride and seamless execution, stressing dignity, individual rights, and liberty for those we support, all against the backdrop of honest common sense.” He stressed that COI strives to ensure it does not fall into the category of “meaningless day programs.” One of the main goals of COI is to move people out of institutions and into community based housing. This is happening slowly but surely.



Keith & Stephanie Gardner (Keith is New Mexico Chief of Staff) & Peter & Kim Dulligan (Peter is a long time Board Member of Community Options).

One of the keynote speakers, Keith Gardner, seemed to have an opinion on par with Stack's. Gardner is Chief of Staff to the Governor of New Mexico, Suzanna Martinez, the first Hispanic woman governor ever elected in the history of the US. He is a strong, ethical man who works tirelessly and with

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Run with your heart this **Valentine's Day weekend**

Saturday, February 9, 2013

Cupid's Chase is a national fundraiser that takes place in 21 major cities, throughout eight states, on the same day. Each race is set to start at 10 a.m. The race benefits Community Options, Inc.

www.comop.org/cupidschase



Employment: The Key to Social Integration

A Hop “Across the Pond”

Joseph Fleming may spend his days living in Wayne, NJ, but he had dreams of traveling abroad. Having never traveled before, his destination options were vast but to him the decision was a no-brainer. He decided to go to London to visit his sister, brother and their families, residents of the UK. With help from COI staff, Joseph acquired a passport and was soon ready for the trip!

On April 2, 2012, after a seven-hour flight, Joseph and Community Support Staff Julio Shields arrived at Heathrow Airport. After settling into his London hotel, Joseph started to voraciously explore this new city. First he enjoyed a bus tour, becoming familiar with the famous landmarks such as the Tower Bridge and the Royal Courts of Justice. During his stay he saw St. Paul’s Cathedral and visited Buckingham palace, where he saw The Royal Mews, one of the oldest working stables in existence. He also had a chance to view the London Eye, the world’s tallest observation wheel, Kensington Palace, and the London Aquarium. Finally, Joseph and Julio enjoyed a ferry from Liverpool to Ireland.

Although it was an amazing experience to learn about London’s history, the most important and rewarding aspect of the trip for Joseph was that he was able to spend time with family and get to know his niece better. His family was kind enough to express their gratitude in emails after Joseph returned to the States. Joseph’s brother wrote, “I just wanted to say thank you to you and everyone else that made the trip possible for Joseph. It was quite an accomplishment. Julio did a great job of taking care of my brother; he is very responsible and conscientious. My thanks are meant to also include those who helped obtain the passport and the purchase and packing of Joe's suitcase.”



An important part of Community Options, Inc.’s mission is to break down physical and attitudinal barriers to community integration and to dispel some of the common misconceptions about people with disabilities. Gabriella Maldonado’s story is living proof that our goal has become and continues to be a reality.

Gabbi is a young woman who moved into a group home in 2008 after leaving her foster care placement of several years. Upon first arriving at Community Options, Inc., Gabbi was extremely limited verbally; she could not express herself fully, spoke using a few simple words such as “hi” and “yes,” would never initiate conversation, and would only answer “yes or no” questions.



Monica Pollock, the General Manager at Chili's said, “We pride ourselves on making people feel special.”

Through the Community Options program named Option Quest, individuals with disabilities are able to develop employment skills by volunteering at various work sites in their communities. After participating in this program for a year and a half, Gabbi decided she was ready for a job. Gabbi worked with our employment department for the next several months filling out job applications and speaking with employers. COI staff worked diligently to prove to employers that despite Gabbi having Mosaic Down Syndrome and Moderate Mental Retardation, she was qualified for the positions for which she was applying and would work extremely hard to ensure she got the job done.

In February 2012, while working with Chili's Restaurant in San Antonio, Texas to raise awareness about Community Options, Inc.'s annual "Cupid's Chase 5 K Run," the employment staff with COI sought this as an opportunity to introduce Gabbi to the manager, request an application and explain her skill set.

Gabbi has now been working for Chili's for almost a year and is considered one of their best employees. She has great qualities; she comes to work on time, rarely calls in sick, never complains, and most importantly she gets the job done. She is receiving job-coaching services from COI staff, and is moving toward being able to work independently.

Today, Gabbi's speech has improved greatly and she is highly verbal, even initiating conversations with staff and peers. She is able to communicate her wants and needs verbally, and can express her personality in a way that was previously impossible. She is happy with her job at Chili's and thankful to them for giving her an opportunity to prove that having a disability should never keep someone who wants to work from working.

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enormous, ungraspable responsibilities- he holds together a very complex state with significant environmental, budget, infrastructure, and political challenges. During his tenure as a legislator he served on the Health and Human Services Committee and was able to see firsthand the programs that do not hold client dignity and respect to the high standard that COI has maintained. This experience helped him to shape his opinion of COI.

As he stood before the audience at the conference, he had a lot to say to those in attendance. He said, "I want to tell you how much I appreciate the work you guys do at Community Options. I'm always humbled to be able to talk to a group of folks who make so many great sacrifices as this group here... I understand the passion but also the toll that it takes on individuals who are providing care. It's not always easy, it's not a very thankful job, in fact many times it's very thankless... What an incredible thing it is there are people who are willing to make those sacrifices so I can tell you on behalf of my boss who sends her regrets that she can't be here to day, to tell you personally "thank you", I want to tell you thank you, thank you for what you do as you venture through life, in helping and improving the lives of those around you. You have the initiatives that will help based upon respect for individuals and their families, something that is so essential, so viable."

Gardner commented on the fact that it is usually the companies that do bad that end up on the radar, not the ones that do good. He reminded the audience of this, and commented, "Think about what happens if you fail, I try not to go to the negative but think about that." This segued into a story that really sums up the obstacles COI faces and the efforts the organization makes. The story he shared is by Lauren Eiseley and he paraphrased:

"I'm reminded of a story, some of you may have heard it. It talks about a wise man that is a talented, published writer. He likes to go for a walk on the beach in the morning before he starts doing his work. He is walking along the beach and sees a figure that looks like it is dancing by itself. So he becomes curious and he starts to pick up the pace as he's walking along the water. Finally as he gets closer he realizes it is not an image dancing, it is a little boy and this little boy has this weird move where he reaches down and grabs something and he throws it in the ocean then he goes back and he does the same thing over and over and over again. So as he gets closer to the little boy he looks at him and he says 'Excuse me son, can you tell me what you are doing?' And the little boy

looks at him and says 'Duh, I'm picking up these starfish and I'm throwing them back in the ocean.' The man says 'What on earth are you doing that for?' He answers 'Because the tide is going out and the starfish are stranded here on the beach and if I don't, they'll die.'

And the man said 'Son, there's millions of starfish along this beach and there's miles and miles of beach. How can you possibly think that you're going to be able to save these starfish? How can you possibly think that you are going to make a difference in how many of these starfish die?'

Well the boy reaches down, grabbed one more starfish, throws it in the ocean and says "I made a difference for that one."

Gardner concluded the story by asking, "How many starfish do we interact with on a daily basis?" He said that it is through organizations like COI, which has assembled a professional group that works with stellar reputation, with accountability and implementation of programs that help those who sometimes can't help themselves that we can continue to make a difference. It is important to remember that this is an organization focused on the individual, not the majority. Change won't happen overnight, it won't happen in the masses, but with continued hard work, dedication and determination, COI is helping individuals, one person at a time.



Featured in photo: Beatriz H. Mauricio, Yolanda Montez, Lydia Alejos, Robert Stack and Chris Traylor, Chief Deputy Commissioner, Texas Health & Human Services Commission.

Please visit our website to view more photos from the iMatter Conference

www.comop.org/conference

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Featured in photo: Greg Hritz, Hadleman Ford, Shoots the gun to start the Princeton, NJ run.



Thank you
to all of our sponsors, volunteers & runners.