



ELSEVIER

Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 11 (1998) 97–100

JOURNAL OF
*Vocational
Rehabilitation*

Book review

Expect the Unexpected: My Dreams and How I Got There, Larry P. Espling.

St Augustine, FL: Training Resource Network, Inc., 1998, pp. 81.

This autobiography is by Larry Espling, a self-advocate and consultant whose experiences serve as an example of the true meaning of natural supports. Larry credits his parents with being pioneers who questioned their doctor's advice for institutional care and provided a home environment in which Larry thrived and from which he ventured off to pursue his dreams — as most individuals his age. I first met Larry in 1971 when I was completing a student teaching assignment at a sheltered workshop in Presque Isle, Maine. During my 8-week practicum experience there, a gentleman began working at the Opportunity Training Center uncoiling electrical meters to recycle the copper for salvage. His name was Larry Espling and he came to the workshop to seek help in figuring out what should happen next in his life. He knew he did not belong at a sheltered workshop but felt there were people to contact who could guide him to pursue some goals in his life. I left this assignment and pursued my career path. Larry left the workshop and began taking classes at the University of Maine at Presque Isle. Twenty-five years later I attended a graduation ceremony at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, to witness Larry Espling receive his Master's Degree. This book contains the events of his life that contributed to the fulfillment of this and other dreams when you *expect the unexpected*.

The general highlights of this book

- Larry Espling comments several times that his ability to ask for assistance from community members has contributed more to his independence than formalized supports from professionals. This is not to imply that several professionals have not been significant in advancing Larry toward his goals but to emphasize that his day-to-day supports came from neighbors, friends, and strangers who were approached one person at a time.
- The importance of Mr. Espling's parents is mentioned throughout this book. Peter and Charlene Espling were pioneers in advocacy and followed their own set of values without ever hearing of the principle of normalization, least restrictive environment, or functional curriculum. They did what seemed right at the time to do and they used the resources at hand to discover what they should do next. There were successes and setbacks but there was never a wavering in their core belief that Larry deserved to be with them and was a full functioning member of the family.
- Sixteen photographs are placed throughout the book and add to the personal, reflective nature of the autobiography. Often, in biographies and autobiographies, photographs are found all together in the middle section of the book but I found the way in which the publisher displayed these visuals to be appealing.
- The format of the book is a sequence of vignettes divided into five sections: Growing up, Reaching My Dreams, A Social Life,

Lessons Learned, and My Life Today. These vignettes are snapshots of Larry's life about which he comments from his current perspective of a person who is accomplishing many of the dreams the seeds of which originated in these stories.

- This publication reflects synergy in the sense that the whole is equal to more than the sum of its parts. This book has pieces of Mr. Espling's past told as individual stories. But, the essence of who he is today is the connections among stories that result in interdependence between past and current events. There is a richness in the perspective the reader gains into Larry's current life based on the lessons learned from past experiences.

Specific areas of excellence

- Social enhancers are described as aspects of the environment that facilitate the connections between people, i.e. an ice breaker. Larry comments that a shirt with the name of his home town, New Sweden, Maine, has influenced people to ask him a question about whether he is from New Sweden. Similarly, a book he may hold could occasion a stranger to inquire about the title or whether he is enjoying a book they have read as well. Larry urges people to become more aware of the role of social enhancers and how this knowledge can influence how individuals can meet their neighbors and other members of their community.
- *'I thought up the term 'community circuit' when I was going to a restaurant. To me, this term means going to different places regularly like banks, restaurants, food markets, movie theaters, and churches' (p. 49).* Larry urges people with disabilities to establish routines in their communities that enhance visibility and to establish a physical presence that is the starting point for social connections. He mentions the work of John McKnight who discusses the 'web' of associational life when people become members of clubs, community boards, recreation leagues, book clubs, etc. Through

membership in these social outlets, individuals become active participants in their community.

- One of the vignettes is titled 'What If I Went to An Institution?' and is written after reflecting upon a visit to an institution, Pineland, in Pownal, Maine. Larry observed individuals who were current residents and wondered if their day-to-day existence would have been his lifestyle under different circumstances. Again, he commends his parents for neglecting the advice of doctors and providing him with a caring, loving family.
- Larry begins, in his preface, with the following excerpt: *Well, let me tell you about myself, I am a:*

- *United States citizen,*
- *male,*
- *son,*
- *brother,*
- *nephew,*
- *customer,*
- *renter,*
- *college graduate,*
- *housekeeper,*
- *member of my church,*
- *life-long learner,*
- *speaker at workshops and at classes and colleges,*
- *member of several boards,*
- *reader of books that cover a wide variety of different subjects,*
- *friend,*
- *traveler and explorer of new places, such as San Francisco and the Rocky Mountains.*

'These roles I am playing or played in the past are very important to me. These roles are played by millions of Americans every day. They are important for me to play in my daily life. The fact that I was born with cerebral palsy hasn't made these roles or other roles that I haven't mentioned any less important in my life' (p. vii). I believe this message is of critical importance to those of us who devote our careers to supporting individuals with disabilities. We

must find ways to assist people to play these roles rather than be skilled at knowing about the condition of cerebral palsy. This is one of the most critical lessons Larry explains in his writing and why Gunnar Dybwad states in the introduction: *'This book should be required reading in any training program in human services, but it will be of special value for any activist in the disability field' (p. vi).*

- *'Sometimes I think what a paradox it is: me, coming from a tiny town in Maine and having more chances to make choices than Bob, who lives in a big city like Cambridge and Boston' (p. 59).* Larry makes this comment upon visiting a friend who lives in a nursing home. He comments on the amount of money from the federal government it takes to keep his friend in the nursing home rather than assisting him to live as a typical member of his surrounding community. Larry comments that it would be extremely difficult for him to maintain his independence if he moved back to northern Maine where there is a paucity of public transportation. However, living in and around Boston provides him with the 'natural community supports' to lead a more independent, self-determined lifestyle.
- *'The more information you have, the more power you feel you have over your own life' (p. 66).* Information allows individuals with disabilities to weigh the pros and cons of their actions. They can determine the risks involved in decisions and whether the consequences warrant a different process to achieve outcomes in their life. When individuals need the support of loved ones, information must be presented in a language that is understood by community members and is free of professional jargon. The internet is the great equalizer in the disbursement of information but caution must be exercised in accepting input from unknown sources.

Areas in which this publication can be enhanced

- The best way to gain the most out of this

publication is to meet Larry Espling in person. Share this book with parents, advocates, and professionals who can invite Mr Espling to present his stories in person. The presentations I have offered throughout the country have been enriched by Larry's presence and participation.

- Distribute this book to newly hired members of a support team and ask them to discuss its content as they are assisting individuals with disabilities to reach their respective dreams.
- Read this book in the context of person-centered planning to compare Larry's path to achieving his outcomes to the planning process of someone for whom you are developing plans to achieve his/her quality-of-life outcomes.

Common threads throughout this publication

- One time Larry asked me what courses I was teaching for the upcoming semester. I mentioned that I was teaching a course — Characteristics of People With Mental Retardation which would be changed to Characteristics of People with Developmental Disabilities. He asked me an important question: *'What do you mean by characteristics?'* I thought about this a lot. What is a characteristic of Larry Espling? — or do we even talk in those terms — unless a person has a label and then their label becomes a prominent characteristic. No, what I am really teaching are the characteristics of supports to assist people to reach their dreams. This book involves a paradigm change from looking at 'characteristics of people' to 'characteristics of supports'.
- Larry Espling gives credit to his mom and dad throughout the book for providing him with the foundation from which to pursue his dreams. Their influence is felt in each and every chapter. This book documents the legacy of their commitment and devotion and their son's gratitude for their nurturing.
- The use of natural supports is the underlying theme throughout this book. Larry emphasizes how people in his community who are not

paid to support him provide the most useful assistance when asked.

Recommendations of its utility to rehabilitation professionals

- The voice of a self-advocate is heard loud and clear in Larry's experiences. Do we take the time to listen to the stories of the history of the individuals who we support? Their story is no less important to hear. Their past is filled with vignettes that clamor to be heard and recognized. This current publication rein-

forces my need to help individuals bring past experiences to light as I better understand how to support them in the present.

- I echo Gunnar Dybwad's comments when he states that this book be required reading for people who are students of the discipline of rehabilitation and/or special education. I will be using this book as a supplemental text in a course and I urge other instructors to do so as well.

Ernest L. Pancsofar, Ph.D.
Book Review Editor