

Tribute to Nick Certo (1949–2017)

Every so often someone comes on the scene who, without an ounce of discernible personal ambition, helps build a vision worthy of universal embrace. Such a person was Nick Certo. When he recently passed after a two year bout with cancer he left a legacy that would surprise this modest guy. The fields of special education, school to work transition, and disability employment will long benefit from his ground breaking work. As it is, however, too few are aware of the importance of his contributions due to his characteristic aversion to self-promotion.

More than 20 years ago Nick contacted me about a program he had underway for individuals with significant disabilities in San Francisco. He wondered if I might consider collaborating on this program. I quickly said yes - the best professional decision I ever made! To make a long story short, his program was a precursor to what has now become a national movement. He called it “seamless transition” because the design is to organize services to special education students with significant disabilities so that they exit school already employed. They would move seamlessly, so to speak, from being students to being employed adults. In Nick’s words, this means that “the day after school ends is no different than the day before.” That is, an individual has the same competitive integrated job and the same supports to maintain ongoing employment success. It was Nick’s particular vision, focus, and determination that sparked the spread of this idea to school districts far beyond San Francisco.

Nick and I worked for many years together to replicate this model in Maryland, Tennessee, and other states. We published professional articles together that documented our journey and the outcomes associated with it. The last article we jointly published was called “Transition and Employment: Reflections from a 40 Year Perspective,” published in 2011 in this journal. Two geezers reminiscing! But the work lives on in the present. Elements of seamless transition

are now promoted in recent federal legislation. The most notable example is the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act which now makes it mandatory that state vocational rehabilitation agencies allocate resources to serve students before they exit school, increasing the likelihood of students making seamless transitions to adult employment.

Knowing Nick’s background, it is no surprise that his work was driven by the presumption that anyone who wanted a job could succeed in employment, regardless of disability or need for support. He was one of the first doctoral students of Lou Brown at the University of Wisconsin. As most people who have followed the history of competitive integrated employment in this country know, Lou Brown is an icon in the movement as an early pioneer of many of the practices that Nick adopted and spread.

Also, among Nick’s contemporaries at the University of Wisconsin was Paul Wehman, whose mark in the field of competitive integrated employment has been and continues to be unparalleled. Others in that early orbit included Paul Bates, John Nietupski, and Pat Rogan - notables in their own right. What a high-powered core group with which to be associated! All with the absolute conviction that employment for individuals with significant disability is not only possible, but should be an expectation. Among this group, Nick’s contribution was unique. He took Lou Brown’s vision and this group’s convictions and created a practical way to organize schools and their collaborators to effect seamless transition for youth with significant disabilities.

Whether or not Nick would ever take credit, his will be a long-lasting legacy. I’m not sure Nick ever fully realized the extent of his professional influence as he went about the business of chairing the Special Education Department at San Francisco State University near the end of his career. However, after 20 years, Sara Murphy of TransCen, Inc. still runs the San Francisco program that piloted the original

seamless transition model with Nick. She is among a legion of other professionals, family members and policy makers who continue to build on his work, whether or not they realize his influence. Thankfully, Nick's ideas will long have an effect on individuals with disabilities who would be vulnerable to a far less fulfilling life in the absence of his influence on transition to employment practice and policy. It was such

an honor for me to have known and worked with him.
Rest in peace, my friend!

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