

TEN EXCUSES NOT TO DO TRANSITIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND ELEVEN REASONS WHY

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In preparing for this talk this morning, I was reminded and just flooded with all kinds of memories about my first job. It was in the summer of 1970. I was 17 and I was trying to find a summer job in a department store before I went to college. I needed working papers and because of my young age there were very few department stores who seemed willing to take a chance on me. I didn't have much to offer. I went to 12 department stores in New York City and filled out applications. I did not get a job and I was disappointed.

Luckily, I had a friend, who many of you know, her name is Esther Montanez. She said to me, "I can get you a job, honey." She called the personnel office at Alexander's where Fountain House had had many Transitional Employment placements. She told me they would see me at least for an interview. So, I was greatly relieved.

The next step in getting my first job involved Jim Schmidt. Now Jim is also a friend, perhaps my oldest friend in terms of the length of our relationship. Jim has been a friend of our family and a close friend of my father, John Beard, for over 30 years. Jim's part in this whole puzzle was to teach me to ride the subway. I was a kid from New Jersey and had never ridden a subway. Jim met me at the Port Authority and we walked down that long tunnel, he taught me how to buy my subway token and exactly

where to stand to catch the right train. He didn't just tell me "catch the E train and get off at Lexington and 54th." So we stood and waited and then got on the train together. We rode the train and then got off. We walked up the street and got to the door. My interview went well; I was hired to work in infant wear.

My Mom, for some unknown reason, decided it would be important to tell me that when I, this young woman from New Jersey, was walking through the dark and unsafe tunnel to the subway it was necessary to walk like a police woman. So my mother gave me training. I am not sure how she knew this, but she taught me how to walk like a police woman. I don't think I scared people off, but it sure gave me confidence.

Around the table at dinner time, we discussed how my day at work had gone. I was greatly concerned that I worked with people who appeared to place more value on dresses which were not arriving on time than the people they supervised. I ranted and raved that it did not seem fair that I could not work without hose which was part of the dress code. My parents reinforced the importance of not "mouthing off" as to the injustice of the hose requirement. I also remember sharing around the dinner table the joy of receiving my first check.

What I have described: the opportunity, the training, and the support, was given to me not because I was in a TEP program. The help was given to me out of friendship and out of love. It was based on a belief that I could do more. And so I want to say thanks to Jim, to Esther, and to my parents, John and Marion because that which they did for me may have seemed small and yet, it was very great; it gave me freedom and it helped ease my transition into adulthood.

When you think about care and love and training and support, like you might have had on your first job, think about those values and actions as you work on Transitional Employment with the members in your club.

I work in a clubhouse called Lakeside House. Lakeside House is a program of Henrico Area Mental Health and Retardation Services. Our mental health center covers three counties around the city of Richmond, Virginia. I am here today to speak openly about the excuses we used at our club for years to delay and avoid securing TEP placements for our members. I am able to speak on this subject today only because we have gotten past our excuses and now have 25% of our average daily membership working on TEP. I am interested in speaking on this subject because I believe that many of you share or have shared some of these excuses. Perhaps in my sharing and being a bit vulnerable, you may hear something that may nudge you to get where you need to go.

I started acknowledging these excuses about a year ago when I was at a regional clubhouse directors meeting. Our director said, "I don't know why our

club doesn't have TEP". I knew why our club didn't and began to share the excuses with my peers. I and others were uncomfortable. Few participated. We were not able to really have a conversation. It is certainly easier to share innovative program ideas. Cannot the sharing of our excuses and struggles be thought of as innovative? I think we need to do more of it!

Excuse #1—"We need to wait until we get out of the mental health center." When I arrived at my job at the clubhouse, we were in the unique situation of having money to move the club into a free standing building of its own. We were located in old day treatment space and were in the process of looking for our own house. Little did we know that the search would take three years! Three years involving a long site search, some neighborhood resistance and subsequent renovation on the building we finally purchased.

During the time of waiting to get out of the mental health center, our program grew from 40 to 80 members. Our mental health center is a beautiful building located in wooded area of town. It is, however, not near any businesses or on a bus line. So, for a long time we said to each other, "We will do TEP when we move." After 2 years of saying this, we couldn't wait that long: we were getting crowded and we were getting "moldy." We continued to further refine our wonderful little clubhouse day program, our units were running well and yet something was missing. One day we finally decided to make a TEP pitch. After our first pitch we got three positions at one site. To have success after the first pitch was a tremendous boost. We thought hey, this is easy. No

problem. But we still were using excuse #2.

Excuse #2 works well for those of us in rural and suburban programs. "We need to wait until we work out or get transportation." Many of our programs are not on bus lines. However, much of the world is not on buslines and people work. Did you ever think about that? Take your lack of transportation as an opportunity to increase your creativity. What are the members' resources? How would you or do you get to work? Can people carpool? Can a bike be used? Do you need to drive the members to work? We felt that it was better to arrive at work or a block away from work on a county van with Pocahontas' face on the side of it, than not to arrive at all. If the member were a family member, say your mother, how would you get her to work? We need to be as concerned about our members as we are about family. So our program delayed further expansion while we were waiting for transportation.

Excuse #3 is "We don't have enough staff." We were stabilizing our first placement, learning about our own and our members' capabilities, and we start to say, "we really need more staff to further develop our TEP program." Now mind you, at that time we had a total of five staff! You don't really need more staff, you need to use people more. What I mean by this, is that we as staff can do more and we can share more of our responsibilities with members. The limits of your program development are only within your own mind. None of us are performing to our potential. A unique and wonderful thing about our program is that we don't have enough staff—this situation creates the very real opportunities for our members.

Excuse #4 is a variation of excuse #3. "We need a special grant to hire a special person to do or coordinate TEP." No you don't! TEP is best done as part of the club and as part of each person's job. When TEP is part of the unit and part of each person's job it is visible to all. It is woven into the fabric of the club. When staff or members are out training a new member or filling in as a backup, members and staff know that those out there are doing TEP "for the club" and that those of us back at the club must pull together "for the club".

All of us are special enough to develop TEP—both members and staff. Our members have gotten us placements too. TEP development is not only a staff responsibility. Betsy, a member from Lakeside House, who is at this conference, has contributed to us getting six additional positions with the supermarket chain she works for on her TEP. She is a special person who made a special effort by her hard work at one supermarket. The regional manager noticed her and offered us additional placements at two other stores. TEP should not be an external part of your club. We found it can be the adrenaline that revitalizes, when it is a part of the ongoing rehabilitation opportunities of the club. We found that as we secured more TEP, more members wanted to work. As more members wanted to work, our clubhouse atmosphere became more work oriented. Everyone's motivation improved. But before we really got on a roll with TEP we continued to focus on the special staff issue for a long time and then found ourselves using excuse # 5.

Excuse # 5 - " We must wait until we fill our vacant positions." You will never fill all of your vacant positions. We have seen over the past four years people come and go for a variety of reasons, most of them good – our staff leave to get married, to move and to go back to school. Our program has also expanded as we now have 125 members, eight staff and a part-time secretary. It sometimes seems like we are always interviewing. A corollary to staff vacancies found this summer was that people sometimes go on maternity leaves and military leaves. So you're going to delay or slow down your program's and members' progress because of staff vacancies? The vacancies will always be there! Figure out a way to redistribute resources – staff and members. You don't close down units because of vacancies – so why do we close down TEP.

We also used Excuse #6- "We'll wait until things calm down.". Does it ever calm down? No. It's not supposed to calm down. We love it when it is exciting. When it is calmed down, something is wrong. I look around; it is too quiet here. What is going on here? Has everyone fallen asleep or left? If your club is really working well it will never calm down. It is not supposed to be calm. When it is calm it is stagnant. Clubs are organic, and ever changing. Clubs are not part of life, they are life itself.

This is a really good excuse we used for a long time: Excuse #7- "We don't have members who are ready. We'll wait until the members are ready." The members are not going to be ready unless they have the opportunities and unless they are really needed to fill the

positions. People are not going to be ready unless you have a need for them to participate. Until they see others go out and work. Until they see other people being celebrated in the community meeting. Until they see others who have tried and not made it, yet, come back and be celebrated for their attempt. The celebration of those who work and those who try can help change your culture on non-work. We had to change our culture. Our club had slipped into a culture where work was not what was valued. By getting more TEP we changed that culture.

Excuse #8 was my favorite one, "I'll do TEP after I finish X," You will never get to all those things you choose not to do. I kidded myself for years that I had to get other things done before I could do TEP. I wrote TEP on my "to do" list so many times that it indented into my pad. (You can probably do it for years, too). Just like things will never calm down, you will never finish all the little things on your "to do" list. As part of the excuse I also had to admit that to develop TEP was not the most favorite part of my job. I was doing other things first because I like those things much more. It took a long time for me to feel OK to say, "I really don't like to go out and make pitches."

What is not OK was that for a while I didn't get anyone else who liked to go out to make pitches. Finally, I shared the horrible secret with one of the staff. Ron said "I'd sure like to go out and do that." So we rearranged our resources, freed him up to go out and make pitches. Since we were in such horrible shape this past January and needed TEPs fast, we designated 50% of his time to develop TEP. All of us took turns

working in his unit. After he made the pitch, the placement was coordinated by a unit staff. Since January, we have gotten nine other positions, lost one and gained two more.

No one called me on Excuse #9 which was “We can’t make this pitch in person, we need to write a letter.” I, because of my own fear of discomfort with the activity of developing TEP, contributed to the myth of “if you are going to make a pitch to a really big company, you don’t walk in there. You write them a letter. Not just any letter, a really big, formal, well-worded letter.” I made the task of writing the letter almost insurmountable. If you are going to write a letter, do it quickly. Develop promotional material that can be used for all pitches. The important thing to remember is that a personal pitch is better. You are selling your program. The style may be varied due to the setting. The content is the same.

The last excuse, #10 was “we’ll wait until we are trained to make the pitch”. You know advocates in the units are not really trained to talk with business people. It takes special skills to go out and get these jobs. We, as committed people, have to sell our programs every day. We sell it to other staff, agencies we link with, and to new members just getting involved. We talk to families, students, and to hospital staff. We are not always comfortable when we are talking about our club. We will never have all the skill we feel we need to have to feel totally comfortable when making a pitch. We, like members, learn by doing—doing things in a real life setting. So you will get more comfortable, as you make more pitches. It is almost too simple. The real issue is, do you really

want to do this? If you can answer that, everything will become clear.

You may remember that the title of this talk is “the ten excuses I’ve used not to do TEP, and eleven reasons to do it. “I hope I’ve given you ten reasons so far by changing the excuses into reasons. The eleventh reason is the most important reason of all: We happen to have eleven people right now working on TEP. And these are pictures of our TEP workers. I brought them with me to Seattle because we are not talking about “the members:” a vast entity of anonymous members that are in the clubhouse. We are talking about individuals, people who I know and who have names like Bernadine, Fanny, Charles, Frank, Francis, and Karla.

If you know these people and are sharing life with them and if you really know how important it is for them to go to work, your issue is solved. You will go out and get transitional employment placements for them. You don’t let your family go without things that they truly need, because you care about them. So, in my mind, the best reason to go out and do TEP is the members who you know, those who are working and those who are not, yet. The impetus for me to be more honest with myself and eventually with fellow staff and members was that I couldn’t look the members in the eye. I had broken what had been a promise made on a very deep level. People would come and say to me, “I thought you were going to get me a job” and I would pull out excuse # whatever. You can’t do that if you really care about the person. When you care about the person, you are honest and care about their rights. Probably few of us look at TEP as a rights issue.

People in our country have a right to work. Work is what makes us full citizens. TEP is not a privilege, not commitment we make which we need to collude with sickness and a system of oppression.

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