

BULLETIN

Caring for a living, with a big heart

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he phrase -the school of life" has an apt illustration in Charlie Wheat. In fact, unlike most residential care workers, Wheat did not need formal training at all to learn how to do his job, which entails providing care, on a myriad of levels, for mentally and physically disabled adults living in a community home.

Charlie Wheat Assistant Chief Steward, OH&S Steward, Member at Large Residential Care Worker South Peace CDC
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-I had training all my life," Wheat says. -I was raised in a family that adopted children and had foster children, many of them physically or mentally challenged. On average we had about eight kids in my home at one time. Over the years there were about 20-25 of us.

-My parents are fabulous ... they have very big hearts," he adds, by way of explanation.

While he will allow that his job is a challenging one, he says it is second nature to him.

-Its been a way of life since I was a kid," he says. It was this way of life, rather than any kind of active job search or career decision, that brought him to his position at the South Peace Child Development Centre in Dawson Creek.

-We lived in Africa for a while, and my school required volunteer time, so I worked in the pool with children. One orphan there had only one leg and only spoke Swahili. I didnt speak any Swahili so I was teaching her to swim using only gestures. When I came back to Canada the CDC opened up their community house, and I volunteered in the pool. When a job became available they asked me to apply," Wheat says. He has been there over 12 years, with the same two clients.

The house provides a home for up to three adults with a range of needs.

-At times some need total assistance with everything from eating to moving. One of our guys is non-verbal; he doesnt speak or do sign-language or nod or shake his head or anything ... he can only communicate through his eyes. It has become an art to understand what hes thinking and feeling," says Wheat.

Wheat provides not only basic physical care, but also emotional care. -I can help them figure out whats going on in their environment by breaking it down to a level they can understand. You do a lot of explaining," he says.

Wheat's job also involves ensuring that his clients have sufficient stimulation, recreation and social time.

-We have trips to the pool twice a week, and exercises every morning. One guy goes out into the community every day. He visits family and goes to the library. He loves music and going for drives; in fact, driving around for an hour listening to a tape is wonderful for him. He loves to socialize, loves shopping, singing, going out and being in the community.

-For lots of these people, the house can become almost like a prison because they physically can't always go out and do things. Our other guy likes walks and loves spending time with his family.

Clearly, the job demands a great deal of patience and generosity of spirit, but Wheat says these qualities come with the territory.

-Some people hear what I do and say, "Oh my God, I couldn't do that for even a day. But I always think about what I would want if I were in these guys' situation, in their bodies. A lot of my empathy comes from having had siblings that were similar to them. I saw what happened when they grew up ... how people treated them. Ignorance is such a big part of their life. People don't know how to treat people with disabilities.

-These guys didn't choose to have this happen to them. We can make their life as bearable as possible," he says.

Discussion of what Wheat gives in his job moves smoothly, and for Wheat, naturally, into talk of what he receives.

-It's definitely humbling when you think of someone whose life consists of having a seizure every three or four days, not being able to communicate verbally or physically, and this guy wakes up every morning and smiles the best he can, and again the next day, and the next. It makes my problems look pretty small. The relationships that I've developed [with clients], knowing that their relationships are really limited, mean so much. You walk in and they've had such a lousy day and they see you and have such a big smile on their faces ... it makes it so worthwhile," says Wheat.

Wheat also appreciates that his job gives him the opportunity to educate the public, challenging the fear and prejudice many people have towards people with disabilities.

-Every day I get the chance to educate people ... when I'm asked what my job is, I like to bring home the fact that these guys are individuals with their own personalities and people miss out on knowing them. If I was in their bodies I'd want to be treated with respect. This is a learning experience that benefits all of society. It's all about dignity and respect," he says.

Unfortunately, provincial funding agencies don't always seem to see it that way. The cutbacks of the Campbell government have clearly hurt his facility.

-Just this year we had a wage reduction and benefit loss to maintain the contract. Cutbacks reduce clients' opportunities; if there's a reduction in staff levels, there's no one free to take a client out. With only one staff on you can only give attention to one at a time, you have to do prep work and can't always watch as diligently as you'd like. There's always a threat that the whole program could be closed down or CDC could be forced to give up its contract. Privatization is a huge threat rippling through this whole sector," he says.

Despite the uncertainty, Wheat continues to love the job his whole life has trained him for. -This is one of those jobs that just kind of fell into my lap, and it has brought opportunities with it, such as working in the union," he says. Wheat has served as Assistant Steward and Occupational Health and Safety Steward at his facility for eight years. He says he finds union involvement immensely satisfying.

-Basically, I hate inequality. HSA is a provider of equality in the workplace. You can't get much better than that," says Wheat.

-What I like about HSA is the power that it gives the smaller person," Wheat continues. -In so many workplaces everything is about the employer. If you speak out about any problem they treat you like you're unreasonable, and you can start to think they're right. You lose your voice. But when you take it back as part of a union it's so

empowering."

As a Steward, Wheat participates regularly in training and meetings in Vancouver, an opportunity he greatly appreciates, he says. -The training is great. It provides escape, helps me avoid burnout, keeps me enthusiastic, and it gives me a chance to refocus. Basically, I become empowered with so much knowledge and then go back to the workplace and make the changes," he says.

Many of those changes have revolved around occupational health and safety. -That was one area where off the bat we had a lot of work to do. There was no functioning safety committee, no one was following the regulations ... in fact, no one even knew the regulations. The approach had been to make things safe for clients but no one had thought much about employees.

-There has been a big change, but we had a big battle to get it," he says. -Its been really satisfying seeing this process through all the fighting and bickering to a point of consensus, and then developing and implementing it."

Wheat says he foresees continuing in his two union positions as long as he is needed. -I love the roles Im in. But Id also love to see someone step up and show interest in these roles. Everyone should understand how the contracts work. Id be very willing to pass on what Ive learned ... although Im also very willing to keep on doing what Ive been doing," he says.

Looking towards the future, Wheat says his hope is that HSA will be able to recoup what has been lost under the Liberal government.

-I hope that HSA will be able to rally its forces together and to have the support of the community behind them so that we can regain a lot of what the Liberals have taken away. For instance, if you look at the regulations for occupational health and safety that we lost, Id like to go back and beyond where we were before!" he says. 

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