More than a Label:

An Ethnography of the Opening Doors (Adults with Disabilities) program

I. Preface

I have been in advanced and accelerated classes my entire life, and I’ve never had any problems learning. In fact, my least favorite subjects are the ones that have no advanced option. Because I get easily bored, I strongly dislike slowing down the pace of the class to accommodate the “special ed” kids. The closest I’ve come to a disability is tearing my ACL and having to rehabilitate my knee. Even then, my disability was merely physical and only hindered my athletic ability.

I have no connection with the Opening Doors program; I discovered it in a community education brochure. After researching as much as I could to determine whether to observe this subculture, I emailed the director. I then met with the director to plan out which days I wanted to observe.

Originally I didn’t think much about why I chose this subculture. Looking back, I can tell that this subculture is the complete opposite of myself. Members of this subculture struggle every day, including their years in school. I wanted to try something new and understand something that, as much as I hate to admit it, irritated me.
When I think of the Opening Doors program, I imagine a group of adults who have disabilities getting together to talk and have fun. I picture the program leaders acting as teachers, and I think the participants will act like children, who are full of energy but don’t have much common sense. I am basing these assumptions on the little research I have done, and my limited experiences with people with disabilities.

II. Background Information

The Opening Doors (Adults with Disabilities) program was created by Betty Held and Bridgette Gothberg in 1987 (Preissing). Participants in the Opening Doors program must be age 16 years or older and have a developmental disability. According to the BHM District Website, “Our classes are specially designed to offer educational, social, life skill and recreational learning opportunities to foster personal growth, teach basic living skills, as well as provide both recreational and social opportunities” (“Opening Doors (for Adults with Disabilities)”). Forty-five similar programs exist around the state that are offered in conjunction with the Minnesota Community Education Association (Preissing).

The Opening Doors Consortium that I am focusing on includes the communities of Becker, Big Lake, Buffalo, Hanover, Howard Lake, Monticello, Montrose, Waverly, and Winsted. Some activities that the Opening Doors program offers include floor hockey, bingo, themed dances, and carnivals. The size of the group varies based on the activity. Most groups have about ten people, but an activity will run with as few as three participants. According to Mark Preissing, “The Opening Doors program simply serves the recreation and life skill needs of any adult with a disability in the area” (Preissing).
Mr. Preissing, a former special education teacher and high school counselor, is in charge of the program, but many different levels of authority can be seen within each activity. The program directors supervise everyone participating in each activity, followed by the caretakers who are in charge of specific people while at the activity.

III. Observations

*Orchard Tour and Hayride: 30 September 2014, 6:00- 7:30 p.m.*

The Opening Doors program hosted a tour and hayride at Deer Lake Orchard where, just like all events that the program organizes, anyone who signed up for the activity was welcome. When the participants arrived at the orchard, they saw a scattering of other cars and people moseying about as they made their way to the large, red barn, where the program was set to take place. Adults ranging from age 16-70, each with a unique disability, conversed with each other, making it clear that many of the people were friends. Every participant sat with a caretaker, who I assumed was only dropping him or her off at the orchard, but was evidently staying for the activity.

When everyone seemed to have arrived, the group split in two. I joined the first group to go out on a wagon ride. The ride was interrupted by occasional “I love yous” and “excuse mes.” This behavior would seem out of place in most able-bodied adult groups, but in the Opening Doors program it was accepted and even considered normal. Everyone, including me, was immediately welcomed into this subculture.
It was unmistakable that the group members knew each other and their caretakers well because they would hug and touch each other. They also joked around by making funny faces, but when the joking turned into pulling on someone’s hair, the caretaker said, “If you don’t behave, we’ll go home.” The caretaker’s behavior is reminiscent of a parent, treating the adults as children. The role of the caretakers seemed to vary between loving and unattached.

As the wagon ride came to a close, the tractor driver, a 35 year-old redhead, mentioned that he was in need of more tractor drivers. Brandon, who had trouble walking and talking, was ecstatic saying, “If you’re looking for tractor drivers, I’m your man!” He repeated this phrase for the rest of the night, showing how determined he was for this to come true. Brandon acted as most people do, looking for a way to contribute and help in society.

After the wagon ride, the group moved into the barn for an apple sorting presentation. An orchard employee with blond hair down to her waist, thickly framed glasses, camouflage pajama pants, and Crocs led the presentation. As she was speaking, many people asked questions like, “What’s that?” and would point to something in the barn. The adults seemed to have a curiosity that I, as a 17 year-old, have already lost. The caregivers didn’t seem to encourage or discourage questions, almost to the point where they seemed indifferent. The lady in camouflage handled the questions not only with expertise, but also with an enormous amount of patience. I finally understood why this unprofessional looking lady addressed this group; she could handle anything.
The presentation ended and everyone walked into the Deer Lake Orchard store. Many people bought apple products with their own money. Most of this money was earned at Functional Industries, a program for adults with disabilities whose mission statement is "To create and promote innovative opportunities that reveal the natural potential of each person we serve" (“Our Mission”). Functional Industries helps these adults find and retain employment, which I sensed the adults were proud of because they brought up *Functional* throughout the night.

**Bingo/Pizza Party: 3 October 2014, 6:00-8:00 p.m.**

The next event, which occurred the same week as the orchard tour, was a bingo game and pizza party. It was once again open to anyone that registered, but this time the activity took place at Discovery Elementary School, one of the six elementary schools in my district. The community education headquarters for the district are housed in this school, so the Opening Doors program is also based there.

The bingo game took place in the school board room, which was set up very differently than the rest of the school. At the front of the room was a large, semicircular desk that was elevated above the rest of the furniture, which included rectangular tables and chairs. Sitting at the large desk were two women, one named Sarah, who were the program directors for the bingo game. The room was filled with people, 17 men and 19 women, most of whom were different than those who attended the orchard tour and hayride. The group must have been unusually large because people said, “The crowd must be due to the colder weather.”

As the people filed in and chose where they wanted to sit, I watched a red-haired woman in a puffy, purple coat walk in and appear to be crying. She was soon
leaving and her caretaker said, “She has to leave. It’s an emergency.” This must be quite normal because no one was surprised or even seemed to notice.

As the last person entered the room, people shouted “Hey Hammy, come have some pizza!” Hammy responded with friendly banter, showing how well everyone knew each other and how comfortable everyone was. When Hammy chose where he wanted to sit, the bingo game began. Sarah and the other program director alternated calling the bingo games. The bingo game included constant questions and chatter like “No, I don’t have that…. 071?… Yes, 071…. 067 has gone to heaven…. Bingo is more than one number, you corn monkeys.” The constant chatter and frequent clarifications were either from hearing loss, not paying attention, or the inability to comprehend the situation. One member of the group, named Susie, wearing maroon velvet pants and a floral pink t-shirt, tried to take charge. She said, “We do this in Monticello, guys. We need to pipe down, since we don’t have a microphone, or just say it a little louder.” She didn’t succeed because pretty soon people were yelling again, “N44….N what?…44….N48?…N44!” Her quest for leadership was obvious, but equally apparent was everyone else’s avoidance of her.

Sarah would silently chuckle to herself after each funny question. She was in her thirties, but with her chunky glasses, comfortable jeans, and sweatshirt, she could easily be mistaken for a high school student. She has been working for the Opening Doors program for almost four years, which was apparent considering she knew everyone by name, just as the participants knew her. Sarah described the activities as “Just fun, hanging out, people we know. People really get into it.”
Sarah’s love for this program and the people in it could be seen in the way her eyes lit up when she would talk to them, but according to her, this wasn’t always the case. “When I first started out, I was like, I don’t really know anybody, so I just stood off in the corner and tried to learn names.”

As the game continued, one young lady with Down syndrome told others “This is my daddy behind me.” At one point, she got a piece of pizza for her dad and told him, “It’s kinda messy. I’m sorry Daddy,” three times. Then she asked if he was mad, but the love and empathy he had for her was manifest in his eyes as he responded with “Thank you, I’m not mad.” Family seemed to be more important to these adults than it is to most people. They’re accustomed to the questioning glances and stares from the public, and when they are with their families, they don’t have to worry about how they are perceived.

The same young woman knew a boy around her age named Ryan, who was also with his parents. He wore sweatpants, a sweatshirt, and a camouflage hat that matched his father’s. Ryan’s fingers were twisted and contorted, and he frequently put his head in his hands. At first it seemed as if Ryan didn’t understand anything, but every time he or the young woman would win bingo, they would do a secret handshake and cheer for each other. Ryan’s parents clearly love him, judging from the matching hats and how they helped him play bingo the entire night. During a break, Ryan tried to get somebody’s attention, saying “Hey you” four times. He finally gave up, which made me wonder if he was used to being ignored. I started to question how I treat people with disabilities. I expect people to listen and respect me, but what do these people expect? Do they really expect anything?
While I watched everyone in the room, I noticed that people would hover their bingo marker over their board in anticipation for the next number called. Their eyes would flicker back and forth, unmistakably showing the difficulty of this task. Family members and caretakers would help when necessary, but I finally realized why everyone was playing bingo; they needed to exercise their minds. When someone would win bingo, reading the numbers was just as complicated, if not more difficult, than finding the numbers. Sarah was understanding and would allow some people to bring up their card instead. She was aware of the difficulties members of the group had, and tried to help them in any way she could. “The thing that kinda frustrates me is that sometimes we have people in wheelchairs and it’s not really capable for everyone,” Sarah explained, when referring to the different types of activities provided and facilities used.

The bingo winners walked to the front of the room and chose their prizes. Everyone chose items like toothbrushes, toothpaste, gum, deodorant, t-shirts, and stuffed animals. These adults don’t define value the same way as most people. One man picked body wash and Susie, in her maroon velvet pants, immediately blurted out, “Do you want men’s instead of women’s?” He responded with, “No, this is fine.” Sarah then told everyone “He’s fine.” The dynamic changed in that moment. Susie was in trouble for questioning someone else’s prize choice, even though she was trying to be helpful. As the leader of the group, Sarah was concerned that the man would feel judged by Susie, and did her best to reassure him and everyone that they could make their own decisions.
**Floor Hockey: 8 October 2014, 7:00-8:00 p.m.**

I pulled up to Discovery Elementary School again and made my way into the cafeteria/gym for another different activity—floor hockey. Already I could feel the adults being treated as children, considering the floor hockey game was being played in an elementary school gymnasium. A garbage can full of floor hockey sticks sat in the corner, and the hockey nets were in place on opposite sides of the gym. I introduced myself to the four people who were also early to the activity and was hounded with questions by a man wearing a gray sweatshirt. I later found out his name was Matt, and he talked to everyone. His eyes were caved in, and his forehead seemed to lead the rest of his body when he walked. His unusual appearance did not hinder his friendliness.

Tracey, the program director, walked in and greeted the roughly ten people that had now gathered to play hockey. She was about five feet tall with dark, curly hair. She was in her early forties and seemed vaguely familiar to me. I later found out that she worked at my high school in the special education department. Tracey told me that “They’re all fun,” when referring to the many activities that she works. She didn’t seem very talkative to me, so her role may be the quiet, supportive friend to all of the adults.

Tracey named the captains and they picked teams. This surprised me because I figured the program would be concerned with leaving people out, like when I was in elementary school. I figured that they wouldn’t want the same people being picked last every game, but they didn’t seem to be concerned about it. These
adults were open to and included everyone, and most off all, they weren't easily offended.

Tracey dumped the red penny jerseys out of their bag and attempted to help the red team put them on. The jerseys were child size, which made the fit rather snug on most of the adults. This is symbolic of how most people treat adults with disabilities; they make them fit into predetermined sizes and assumptions, rather than making a system that fits them better.

The game began and the orange, plastic puck flew back and forth across the gym. I had assumed the game would have a relatively slow pace, but I could not have been more wrong. The game was more intense than any floor hockey I've ever played. The adults playing were very similar to any able-bodied adult; they still wanted responsibilities, to be leaders, and to compete. When people refer to these adults as disabled, they focus too much on the disabled label compared to the adult label.

Tracey stood on the sidelines yelling, “Heads up, Bethany! Good block Mike! Karen, do you want a longer stick?” She was very involved and supportive, and her ten years of expertise showed. She told me, “I enjoy seeing the people get excited over winning and seeing new things.” She has continued to work for Opening Doors because of the joy it brings her, not the paycheck.

The adults ranged in ability and age once again. Some people would stand like statues, while others would race across the gym. Multiple times during the game, the competitive people would stop and let the statues take a shot, pausing the entire game. I realized that these people are a family; they care about and will help
each other. This feeling is different than my subcultures that have a *fend for yourself* motto. The groups that I’m a part of could learn about support and encouragement from these adults.

At 7:30 p.m., the group took a short break. Matt came over and sat down next to me. He started talking about anything and everything. We had previously talked about the colleges I was interested in, and now we talked more about him and his life. He attended Buffalo High School and played on the adapted softball, bowling, and swim teams. He told me, “I played adapted softball for five years. I started in middle school.” The look of pride on his face when he said this was unforgettable. He talked about *Functional* and how he couldn’t get hurt because, “I have work tomorrow, Monday thru Friday, 453 bucks.” He works at *Functional* from 8:00 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

Matt was brought to the activity by a caretaker, who told me, “I’m just here with a couple of clients.” The wide varieties of caretakers immediately became even more clear. Her disinterest and imperviousness were palpable, to the point that she annoyed me. On the opposite side of the spectrum were the caretakers who played in the hockey game, and cheered for their clients.

Matt seemed comfortable with me when I first walked in, but by the time the game was coming to an end, he asked me, “Do you have a boyfriend? Do you want one?” Our comfort level with each other had increased dramatically.

**IV. Conclusion**

The Opening Doors program is based on “serving the recreation and life skill needs of any adult with a disability in the area” (Preissing), but the purpose of the
organization goes beyond this. The organization enriches both the body and mind in the activities that they provide. It is obvious that floor hockey and other similar activities keep these adults physically active, but the calculations the participants make as they search for a bingo number or aim for a shot on goal keep their minds active too.

As a society, we focus on the “disabled” label and interpret that to mean they are incapable of completing tasks independently. As a result, we have a tendency to treat them like children. Nothing made this more apparent than watching these adults being stuffed into child size jerseys to play a child’s game in an elementary school. However, as I watched them play the hockey game with such passion and exchange hugs and compliments on a regular basis, I realized that these people are far more similar to me than they are different. They still want to be competitive and independent, to succeed, and to feel loved and accepted.

Instead of labeling and judging this group of people, we should be learning from them. As I saw firsthand, they have an openess and curiosity worthy of admiration. Everyone should be envious of the joy that this group allows into their lives.

**Work Cited**


Preissing, Mark. Email Interview. 7 Oct. 2014