

L'Arche Twin Cities

Our Service Is Community

By Bryan Boyce

When my wife and I were about to have our first child in 2023, I was years deep into running my own small-but-punching-above-its-weight disability nonprofit. A peer nudged me to apply for an additional job with an organization people had been trying to bring to Minnesota's Twin Cities on and off for 40 years. The international organization had recently been rocked by revelations of abuse by its well-known founder, and the local group had just scraped together enough money and a clear enough model to hire its first employee.

That I said yes might simply have something to do with me being a sucker for punishment, but a bigger part of it is the magic and possibility I saw in the name L'Arche.

As our mission states, L'Arche Twin Cities (larchetwincities.org) is a group of people with and without intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD) creating experiences of belonging that are rooted in mutual, authentic relationships. We are part of the international L'Arche network of intentional communities, and based in the Midway neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota. Through collective vulnerability and openness, we are building a community that addresses loneliness and isolation through our authentic connections and regular gatherings that respect and embrace differences. By recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of all people, we strive to be a dynamic movement for radical inclusion.

In most other settings, particularly in the United States, L'Arche is a group home—though as I put it, the coolest group home ever. Not just residents with IDD but their caregiving staff live together ("lifesharing," in the L'Arche way of speaking) as peers who have much to learn from and offer each other. There's a joy, warmth, authenticity, and mutuality of culture that surpasses the systemic or institutional culture I feel at most group homes. Historically, this comes from L'Arche's rooting in Catholic social teachings, though now the organization is inclusive of everyone regardless of faith. They've also worked comprehensively to reckon with and chart a path beyond the organization's lengthy investigation of its founder.

Visiting other L'Arche communities—often freewheeling dinners that involve conversation, fairy lights, décor driven by people with IDD, and the joyously unexpected twists and turns common to an inclusive group setting—it's not unusual for me to think, *I just kind of want to live here for a while. Or, I wish my brother's group home was more like this.*

In the Twin Cities, however, L'Arche is not a group home, both because of a state freeze on building new group homes and more significantly because our founding board (many of them former L'Arche residents themselves) bravely believed that there was a way to offer the same L'Arche magic while giving participants with IDD more agency and flexibility in deciding where and with whom they reside.

L'Arche members reunite outside Parkway Theater in Minneapolis.



And so last fall, L'Arche Twin Cities piloted a unique, mold-breaking model of disability community. Convening six self-advocates with IDD, six formal and informal caregivers, and dozens of eager ancillary community members into a cohort, we sought and found ways on a weekly basis to build authentic connection and support through intimate small-group discussion—think candle lighting and sharing how we're doing in mind, body, heart, and spirit—and broader community-facing excursions such as college football games, improv events, or spaghetti dinners.

So many joys and challenges brought us to this moment!

Without the “carrot” of providing a place to live, describing what L'Arche is—always a tough task—and why someone would want to be involved, got a little more difficult. I remember going door-to-door with intern Aine-Ramiro Shanahan last summer working to reengage people with IDD and their support people, who were uncertain about the new model. Showing up at someone's residence and asking, “Do you want to be a part of our community?” has the kind success rate that makes you empathize with the protagonists of *The Book of Mormon*.

Or there's the time L'Arche member Alex Junge was at his day program less than a mile from the state capitol, wanting to join us at Disability Pride Day. His group home and day program staff could only give group rides and his guardian, who required permission for him to get a ride from anyone else, was far away. That he couldn't bridge that gap despite the geographic proximity drives us to keep building more natural supports and community in his and others' lives.

Successes also keep us going, like the fact that we've built our organization as a side-by-side IDD-inclusive workplace from the ground up. Mao Yang, our community manager, has occasionally had to push L'Arche USA—which is excited about our trailblazing model on paper, but doesn't always know how to engage it in practice—to understand that, duh, people with IDD should have a seat at all decision-making tables, even if that means the table has to change shape. She has also acquired for herself about half a dozen side-hustle jobs just through networking at the coworking office we share.

Or there's Ben Merritt, a direct support professional (DSP) who works 9 to 5 at a day program and with whom I'd had fun conversations with in passing before. Being part of our L'Arche offers coaching and cash to him and other established DSPs in the field. But

what I've observed really moves him to show up on a Saturday morning when he doesn't have to is the community and camaraderie, breaking bread with people he's not officially in charge of or officially with, but who are just a fun and motley crew to hang out with.

And we'll never forget the day L'Arche member Shaunte Martin got lost on her way to a group movie. It wasn't only L'Arche staff who stayed on the phone with her, helping her navigate and advocate to her Lyft driver to get to the correct spot. It was other L'Arche members with IDD, who could have gone back to their own homes, but saw it as their responsibility to stay until she arrived in person and they could give her a hug and say everything's going to be okay.

Bit by bit, through these moments and others, L'Arche Twin Cities is working to achieve what many traditional providers seek but often have trouble delivering: providing people with disabilities new and more varied networks, experiences, skills, and opportunities. It also delivers what many direct care workforce initiatives aspire to: additional funding for veteran caregivers, creating a pipeline of informal supports, and building a community that helps those caregivers prevent burnout or isolation. Perhaps most importantly, it's providing opportunities for a diverse group of people with and without disabilities to find meaning and joy together in a field and world that is often plagued by loneliness and separation.

I don't like to psychoanalyze Jay, my brother with IDD. He can have his own pages in this magazine! But I find it curious and frustrating, in that older brother kind of way, that most times I talk to him on the phone, or even see him in person, he greets me not with “good to see you” but with “I miss you”—and proceeds to repeat that even as we are spending time together. I take it as a reminder that we can always do more.

Perhaps one veteran L'Arche executive director put it best. Initially puzzled by our model, he asked what service we provided, exactly. By the end of a presentation that I delivered with one of our 40-year L'Arche Twin Cities veterans, you could see the light bulb going off in his head as he articulated, perfectly,

“Ah—your service is *community*.”

That's something we all need, and I believe our brothers and sisters with IDD, in the most generous sense of that word, are an indispensable part of the solution.



(from left) L'Arche core member Patrick, assistant Bernie, and board member Kat during Love on the Spectrum watch party and brunch at St. Clement's church in St. Paul.

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L'Arche community members pass a candle and check in with the group in mind, body, spirit, and heart.

Feeling Safe, Feeling Understood

By Mao Yang

There is so much more that needs to be done in order to make the whole world feel like a place with no barriers, so that no decision is made about us without us.

I was born with the developmental disability of cerebral palsy, as well as all the hard, sad, yet joyful and beautiful, things that can come with having to live life with IDD.

We are a non-profit organization focused on building a community without the traditional four walls of a building, or an intentional community without walls, as we like to say.

Not all core members can have their own staff or PCAs to assist them at these events. Like helping a core member drink their water so that they can get their basic human right and need met. When there is no assistant, it may be that single barrier which can make some core members very anxious and scared enough to be unable to attend and fully enjoy our events which is very heartbreakingly for us. One of our core members was less than a mile away at his day program and he really wanted to come be a part of the celebration, but his staff was unable to transport him so unfortunately, had to miss out on the day's festivities.

SOMETIMES THE RESOURCES are not there, and we wish we could do more. Before I found out about

nonprofits like L'Arche, I didn't know that I could use my disability in a positive yet constructive way. I didn't know that I could use my life experiences to change the world.

We do this by planning excursions, ranging from sports games, movies, live shows like improv, cookouts, and joining virtual events with other similar organizations.

To show them that no matter their religion, background, gender, or communication style, they can, and deserve to live a life in a world without any barriers. It is one of the only places in my life where I can feel safe and truly appreciated for who I am and all that makes me who I am, quirks and all. There is no concrete handbook on how to raise a child with any degree of IDD, in a culture that says and is not afraid to show you, that if your body doesn't function in a way that it should, there is something wrong with you, you are sick, and you need to be cured/fixed.

We each can learn something from one another. Loneliness, and that need for a community, to be validated and understood, is a very universal feeling.

Mao Yang is a disability justice advocate who serves as community coordinator for L'Arche Twin Cities in Saint Paul, Minnesota.