

BOOK REVIEWS

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Two books are reviewed for this issue. Both books are ones that you will want to read and reread to discover new connections with your work. The first review pertains directly to the theme of this issue and is written by Alex Kotlowitz. He allows each of us to relive his experiences of living with a family in the Henry Horner Projects of Chicago. There, he befriends two brothers and chronicles their lives over a 2½ year period of time. The second review is a book of wisdom and insights that each and every reader should have on their shelf as a daily reminder of the real purpose for the supports we provide to individuals with disabilities. Team members of Options in Community Living are to be congratulated on sharing their stories.

THERE ARE NO CHILDREN HERE The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America

Alex Kotlowitz

New York: Doubleday, 1991, \$21.94, 324 pp.

I didn't know when I first picked up this book that I would review it for this journal. After I found myself reading it for the second time, I knew it was too good a book not to share with the readers of this journal. The author, Alex Kotlowitz, is a writer for the *Wall Street Journal*. He lived with a family in the Henry Horner Projects in Chicago and developed a chronology of the lives of two brothers over a 2½ year period of time. This book presents an in-depth qualitative study of a culture and life-style foreign to many of its readers. Kotlowitz brings the lives of Lafayette and his younger brother Pharoah into your mind and heart.

General highlights

- The reader is reminded of the pressures placed on youths in urban projects who look for illegal

means of sustaining a livelihood. Education is not a prized commodity for survival on the street.

- The struggles of LaJoe to maintain a family from which to nurture her children is beset with challenges ranging from the welfare office to a seldom-present spouse.
- This is a book well worth a second reading to pick up the quality of writing and gain a greater appreciation for the author's flowing style.
- The reader gains an appreciation for the amount of energy exerted by all family members just to survive.
- The author gives an accurate portrayal of a representative family growing up amid despair and how it rekindles the flame of hope for a better future.

Specific areas of excellence

- I read this book for the first time right before the Los Angeles riots. Ironically, the opening quote by Langston Hughes connects vividly with the events of this book and the situation in Los Angeles:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a weary load
Or does it explode?

- “and then I asked Lafayette what he wanted to be. ‘If I grow up, I’d like to be a bus driver,’ he told the author. *If*, not *when*. At the age of 10, Lafayette wasn’t sure he’d make it to adulthood.”
- “Lafayette said, ‘I don’t have friends,’ he told his mother. ‘Just associates. Friends, you trust.’”
- The killing of a friend, other gun fire, gangs,

drugs, and the stench of environmental neglect are presented in vivid detail and with soul-searching honesty.

- Pharoah has a speech impediment that creates some awkward moments during the class spelling bee. As you follow his thoughts and feelings, you discover his strength to deal with this impairment without the assistance of trained professionals.

Areas in which this publication can be enhanced

- Go to Chicago to see the environments mentioned in this book. If that's not possible, visit the urban centers close to you and you will see many Lafeyettes and Pharoahs.
- Read Saul Alinsky's account of organizing specific neighborhoods in Chicago and learn from his insights, defeats, victories, and renewed challenges.

Common threads throughout this publication

- This book reminded me of Studs Terkel's *American Dreams: Lost and Found*. The dreams and nightmares of many individuals are interwoven in Kotlowitz's book. There are broken dreams and shattered dreams but there are also gratifying and satisfying dreams.
- A poignant quote from LaJoe sums up the connections throughout the book and hence its title: "She liked the idea (about a book dealing with their two sons), although she hesitated and then said, 'But you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children.'"
- "It is a story that doesn't have a neat and tidy ending. It is instead, about a beginning, the dawning of two lives. Most of all it's a story about two friends."

Recommendations of utility to rehabilitation professionals

- The insights provided in this book are astounding. It is the telling of everyday events

in the two brothers' lives that create an honest look at monumental challenges. Those of us who support people with disabilities from different ethnic backgrounds need points of reference like the ones offered by Kotlowitz.

- The author's writing style is superb. As such, rehabilitation professionals will value its content from both a literary and content perspective.

REMEMBERING THE SOUL OF OUR WORK

Stories by the Staff of Options in Community Living

John O'Brien and Connie Lyle O'Brien, Eds.

Madison, WI: Options in Community Living, 1992, \$15.00, 159 pp.

This is a book I have been waiting to see and read for a very long time. I have often thought and wondered about the stories of people who provide the most direct support for individuals with disabilities. Even though the emphasis for the stories has a residential focus, readers of this journal will readily relate to each and every one of them. This is one of the few books where I felt compelled to write to one of the authors of the stories and thank her for sharing the poignant moments with unknown readers. This book is so noteworthy that I am using it as the discussion point of reference for a two-day seminar I am conducting for job coaches. You will want to read some of these stories over and over. The editors provide interesting introductions to sections and add their wisdom to that of the authors.

General highlights

- The stories are written by individuals who support people with disabilities through ordinary and extraordinary events.
- The titles for the clusters of stories provide clues to the depth of topics including, "Ordinary Moments," "Everyday Triumphs," "Assistance," "Understanding," "How People Change,"

“Dreams,” “Family,” “Friends,” “Money Matters,” “Fighting the System,” “Clienthood,” “Control,” “Suffering & Death,” “Teachers,” “On Words of Power,” “On Why I Do This Work,” “On Writing Stories At Work.”

- There is an open invitation for readers to share their own stories about their involvement with individuals whom they support.
- A general feeling of “Look how much I’m learning from the people I support!” pervades each section of the book.
- The writing is great. This is a book that can be shared with families, graduate students, professionals, and other support people alike. Readers will choose their favorite stories based on the memories a story raises from their own contact with friends with disabilities.

Specific areas of excellence

- One author eloquently expressed some observations about recruiting individuals as follows:

Recruiting is a fun job, I rarely get the blues
With ads in all the papers, blue sheets and interviews
And once these folks are hired, it usually turns out nice
I’ve not been disappointed — well . . . maybe once or twice.

- I recently experienced the death of a good friend and coworker who had cerebral palsy. Before I even read the section on “Suffering and Death,” I knew some of my own feelings and reactions were going to be echoed by the writers. I was not disappointed.
- In the introduction, Gail Jacob quotes one of the writers, Julie Nichols-Younes, who says, “if this seems somewhat disjointed or confusing it is because what I am trying to say is not totally clear to me yet” (p. 1). I have often had the same reaction!
- Again, Gail Jacob comments, “it will be more fruitful to let these stories communicate the tellers’ ideas and insights and frame important questions than to depend on them for answers” (p. 1). I often feel this is the essence of the teaching and technical assistance I provide in my daily consultations.
- The editors provide some reflections. “Deciding to take charge and when to back away tests the

support worker’s understanding of the person. Sometimes deciding in terms of agency values leads to good outcomes; sometimes to more questions.”

Areas in which this publication can be enhanced

- Write your own stories and share them with your colleagues. Use the section from the book that provides some guidelines for this process.
- Read more stories about and by individuals with disabilities. Stories can convey images in a more human and caring style than most other forms of communication.
- Draw connections between the experiences of the writers and your own similar experiences. How can these stories be points of departure for discussion among you and your peers?

Common threads throughout this publication

- There is no censorship of how a support person’s thoughts are best arranged to convey his or her own personal message. The individuality of each writer is maintained throughout the collection of short essays, stories, and poems. Each and every section contains uniquely different styles brought together with editorial workmanship.
- The value in learning from the people we support is evident throughout. It is not us/them but we-together journeying through life, sharing moments with each other, and both becoming better people through our interactions.
- The true values of providing support surface with questions like, What is she trying to tell me through this aggressive behavior? What do we do next? What supports are best for . . . ? The process of deciding what to do is usually more important than what is decided.

Recommendations of utility to rehabilitation professionals

- I would recommend this book as must reading whether for university faculty, in seminars at

agencies throughout the country, or to share with close friends.

- This publication will have a revered place on my bookshelf. It reminds me of a quote I read in a biography of a great song writer. The author defined an artist as someone who puts into

words, music, or shape something you have known to be true for a long time but were unable to express as well as the artist. I feel the writers of this publication are true artists in every sense of the word.