BOOK REVIEWS

ERNEST L. PANCSOFAR, PhD
55 Old Willimantic Road
Columbia, Connecticut 06237

CREATING COMMUNITY ANYWHERE:

Finding Support and Connection in a Fragmented World

Carolyn R. Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen
New York: Putnam, 1993, 334 pp., $15.95, soft cover

John McKnight, from the Center for Urban Studies at Northwestern University, has alerted people in the field of special education and rehabilitation to the importance of community-building activities. Much of our efforts at supporting people with mental retardation is to assist them to enter several communities whose members are diverse. It is not enough to merely acknowledge the existence of these communities. We must investigate the relationships among people in areas of decision making, communication, interdependence, life enrichment, and diversity. The book contains a rich source of information in this targeted focus area. Well-researched and presented, in their book the authors provide basic information about how successful communities develop, thrive, and enrich the lives of its members.

One of the chief aims of the work to which each of us commits our energy is to enhance the quality of life for the people we support. In the context of this issue's topic, life enrichment occurs in a community as defined for or by individuals with mental retardation. This publication contains an in-depth review of the defining characteristics that shape one's community and how we each become active participants in sharing the gifts of what community members have to offer. Those of us who support people to work, recreate, and reside in the context of a community need to understand the dynamics of how communities begin, mature, and sometimes end. Shaffer and Anundsen draw on a full range of experiences and share their expertise about the influences that define "community building" for us all.

General Highlights

- The content of this book is not specific to any single category of (dis)abilities. Instead, experiences are drawn from such diverse contexts as the formation of support groups around a current challenge, co-housing options, residences that include elderly individuals, subsidized housing in urban settings, and general family dynamics.
- Chapters contain quotes from visionary sources and are located in the outside columns. These quotes relate directly to the adjacent content.
- The resources included at the end of each chapter sample a full range of additional readings, from newspaper references to scholarly writings.
- The four specific parts of the book include headings of:

  1. What Community Is and Why We Need It
  2. Community without Cohabitation: You Don't Have to Move in Together to Enjoy Mutual Support
  3. New Ways of Living Together
  4. Starter Kit: A Map, Some Basic Tools, and a Few Warnings

- The authors emphasize the matching process between an individual and the type of community in which he or she will fit best. The recommendations provided are similar to the compatibility matching process now prevalent in supported employment programs for people with mental retardation.
- Much of the content concerns how members of groups communicate and air differences as they seek to attain self-directed goals. Individuals on planning teams would do well to heed the discussion on the natural development of groups (means) and the cycles inherent in their evolvement.
- Consensus building is offered as the general style of decision making among team members. The authors emphasize that community members must acknowledge their desire to achieve similar results by being members of the

group rather than being forced to participate against their will.

■ Excellent suggestions are offered for nontraditional styles of building a community at work, in a home, and with friends.

Specific Areas of Excellence

■ Community is defined as "a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people:

1. Participate in common practices;
2. Depend upon one another;
3. Make decisions together;
4. Identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships; and
5. Commit themselves for the long term to their own, one another's, and the group's well-being." (p. 10)

This definition would be a great place to start for people who are on planning teams as they develop a sense of community among themselves at the same time that they prepare a focus person to experience communities of his or her choosing.

■ "The phenomenon of synergy: the experience of individuals and groups existing in a dynamic balance and contributing to one another's full expression rather than detracting from it" (p. 31). There is no room on planning teams for negative oriented people who are not vested in discovering ways in which a person's dreams can become reality. This synergistic blend of talents and expertise occurs within an atmosphere of optimism and possibilities.

■ "Presenting a plan for approval is vastly different from gathering people together and allowing ideas to emerge" (p. 103). Individuals who help plan life experiences for people with mental retardation must include that person in the process to the maximum degree possible. The planning process will take longer to complete, but the focus must be on person-direct supports whenever possible.

■ "We want satisfaction from accomplishments and friendships, balanced personal and profes-

sional lives, and to have fun in our endeavors" (p. 116). This quote originates from Levi Strauss's Aspiration Statement. This statement resembled a close fit to outcome statements developed by individuals with mental retardation when quality-of-life goals are the focus of a team's planning efforts rather than skill-specific outcomes.

■ "We must stop 'going to work' or 'staying home' but must think of our lives as a continuum of endeavor, a collection of works making up a larger work that is our lives," quote by Jim Autry (p. 120). Each of the support persons in an individual's life represents a fraction of activities that make up the totality of one's life. Each team member needs to view his or her role as an enhancer in the overall life functioning of the individual and discover how his or her input contributes to quality-of-life outcomes.

■ "We chose the term 'phase' rather than 'stage' in describing this development [the development of true community] to convey its cyclical as well as linear movement" (p. 208). In our work with individuals with disabilities we should not be looking for a linear growth of progress but instead understand the relationships among diverse influences in a person's life and how they connect in a spiraling motion toward a common goal; not smoothly but in often unpredictable ways.

■ "Organizations specializing in group dynamics often have the hardest time noticing when they themselves have slipped into pseudo-community" (p. 237). This insight provides a caution to each of us periodically to bring in outsiders to our decision-making process and gain from the feedback of how the dynamics of the team decision-making process can be improved.

■ "The solution is not a model, it's a path — and the key to that path is dialogue . . . I believe the only way answers will emerge is through real talk among people" as quoted by Frances Moore Lappe (p. 253). This quote pertains to many other areas in which each of us are involved. We need to stay away from adopting "models" with specific, concise steps to follow

but, instead, learn from what others have found to work well for their specific circumstances. Extract what seems to make sense for the person you support, and develop a person-centered approach that makes use of the best of what other teams are developing throughout the world.

■ "'Focalizer.' This new-style leader, like a lens, gathers together the elements and enables synthesis to take place through the focusing of these elements into a unity" (p. 275), as quoted by David Spangler, co-leader of Scotland's Findhorn community. This word fits better than facilitator or team leader when describing the responsibilities of a person who brings the ideas of many into "focus" when deciding a course of action for either a specific challenge or general life-directing outcomes.

Areas in which this Publication Could Be Enhanced

■ Excellent resources are located at the end of each chapter. The interested reader will obtain an ample set of recommended books and other publications as well as networking prospects with names and addresses of key people in the community-building field.

■ By sharing the recommendations in several chapters, individuals can create communities in several areas of their life, including relationships with loved ones, peers at work, planning teams for people you support, and interactions among professional colleagues who enhance your expertise.

■ If several people at your place of employment read 3 to 4 key chapters, the atmosphere under which decisions are made will be enhanced. Respect for individual talents among team members is emphasized, and several strategies

are provided for advancing the brainstorming process.

Common Threads

■ Interdependence among community members, rather than independence, is stressed as an agreeable outcome.

■ The general principles of community building can occur on a one-to-one, group, local citizenry, and worldwide basis.

■ There are natural cycles most groups evolve through, especially if composed of committed, similarly focused individuals. The knowledge of these cycles facilitates communication among group members.

■ The investigations of how groups succeed and fail give insightful lessons for how we participate in both small and large communities in our sphere of influence.

Recommended Usefulness for Rehabilitation Professionals

■ Building community was not a specific area of concentration in most of our formal education process. Those of us who have chosen to support individuals with mental retardation attain an enhanced quality of life will be assisting them to become members of several communities. We would be wise to investigate the cycle of community building, how decisions are made in communities of diversity, and learn from the stories of successfully operating community endeavors.

■ There is much useful information in sources similar to this publication that contains a systems approach to viewing relationships and methods of communication among community members. As we provide assistance and help to "focus" the talents of all who support an individual, we share an obligation to enrich communities through the inclusion of people of diversity.