

Evaluation Report:
***Center for Independent Futures’
Community Connectors and
Bridge Builders Project***

*Funded through an Investment from the
Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities
under the Life Like Any Other Initiative*

Aleksa Owen, MSW and Tamar Heller, PhD
Institute on Disability and Human Development
University of Illinois at Chicago

October 20, 2016

Report prepared for Center for Independent Futures



Table of Contents

Project Overview	3
Evaluation Design and Data Collection.....	3
Contextual Factors	5
Results and Outcomes	6
Training Evaluations.....	6
Matched Pre- and Post-Test Results.....	7
Participant Outcomes	11
Bridge Builder Outcomes	13
Discussion.....	16
Challenges	16
Lessons Learned.....	17

Project Overview

The *Life Like Any Other “Community Connectors and Bridge Builders Project”* was designed to identify and train community volunteers to spend time with young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in “mainstream” (non-disability specific) settings and activities. Through the growth of such relationships, the project anticipated an increase in social capital for young adults with IDD. These volunteers, called “Bridge Builders,” were connected with participants who had shared or similar interests, through informal social networks. At each of the three project sites, one Community Connector served as the “matchmaker” and provided ongoing support to the pairs. The project proposed to match 32 Bridge Builders with 40 participants across the Frankfort, Evanston, and Little Village/Berwyn sites. Additionally, the project proposal emphasized the inclusion of 10 non-disability specific organizations, including local places of worship and organizations like the Rotary Club and the Lions’ Club. In practice, it was difficult to identify specific organizations; most Bridge Builder-participant pairs were matched according to their interests outside of formal organizations.

Evaluation Design and Data Collection

This evaluation was guided by three sets of questions:

- 1) For individuals with IDD, to what extent did they identify interests in mainstream community activities? To what extent were they introduced to and had access to mainstream community activities? To what extent did they participate in mainstream community activities with Bridge Builder volunteers and others community members?
- 2) For Bridge Builder volunteers, to what extent did they build foundational understanding and skills regarding people-first language, ability awareness, self-advocacy, community engagement and information regarding disabilities? To what extent did they increase relationship-building skills with individuals with

disabilities and facilitation of individual's participation in mainstream activities of mutual interests?

3) To what extent were the Bridge Builder training sessions effective in preparing Bridge Builders to work with individuals with IDD?

This evaluation utilized mixed methods, including statistical analysis of pre- and post- training evaluations and qualitative interviews with Bridge Builders and participants. The training pre- and post- surveys, completed by Bridge Builders who were required to attend a 2 ½ hour training session, focused on how effective the training was in increasing confidence in spending time with people with disabilities, positive attitudes about people with disabilities, including social inclusion and rights, and perceptions of the quality and quantity of interactions with people with disabilities. To measure these outcomes, the surveys included scales that were adapted from previously validated scales measuring attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with Bridge Builders and participants. For Bridge Builders and participants who spoke Spanish, an interpreter was utilized. Interview questions for Bridge Builders focused on providing a context of how time together was spent, what the Bridge Builder's experience was like, what their motivations were for volunteering, and what (if any) impact this experience had on how they understood people with disabilities. Interview questions for participants included:

1. Tell me about your experience with the Bridge Builders program.
What kinds of things did you do? What goals did you have?
2. How did it make you feel to be a part of the program?
3. What did you like best about being a part of the program?
4. What parts of the program were hard or could have gone better?
5. Would you recommend this program to others? Why?
6. What about your life has changed because of this program, if anything?

Themes from participants' and Bridge Builders' interview responses were identified through an open coding process. Results from training evaluations and interviews are discussed below.

Contextual Factors

This project is unique in that it was enacted in three communities in the greater Chicago Metropolitan area: Evanston, Frankfort, and Little City/Berwyn. These communities, with unique assets and challenges, provide context for the progress of the project and its outcomes.

Evanston: Founded in 2002, the Center for Independent Futures (CIF) is based in Evanston and primarily works with youth and adults with disabilities within and around Evanston. Evanston is located just north of the city of Chicago and has a population of 75,000. There is a rich civic tradition and it is not uncommon for residents to be involved as volunteers within a variety of nonprofit organizations. Deeply committed to person-centered supports that enable self-determined lives for people with developmental disabilities, CIF has engaged the social capital resources within Evanston and has partnered with outside organizations to strengthen their identity and their work.

Frankfort: CIF has, within the last two years, reached out to Frankfort to facilitate housing for young adults with disabilities. Frankfort, a community located about 35 miles south of Chicago, has experienced rapid growth within the last 15 years, with a current population of almost 19,000 residents. However, given the amount of newer residents and a high percentage of commuters, Frankfort does not have in place the kind of social networks that are so firmly entrenched in Evanston. The differences between these communities extend to resources that people with disabilities often utilize, including provider agencies, public transportation, and common spaces. Evanston, both because of its size and because of its established traditions, offers more of these resources to its residents with disabilities.

Little Village/Berwyn: CIF is expanding its reach and resources to support Hispanic/Latino individuals with disabilities and their families. For this project, CIF

has focused on the Chicago neighborhood of Little Village, and a neighboring village bordering the city of Chicago, Berwyn. Originally the town of Cicero was also included in this project site; however, project staff found that Cicero had its own set of resources in place for people with disabilities and was not open to new opportunities like the Community Connectors and Bridge Builders project. Little Village, a predominantly Latino neighborhood with almost 100,000 residents, offers a thriving business community but also experiences significant violence because of gang-related activity in nearby neighborhoods. 88% of its residents self-identify as ethnically Hispanic, and many residents speak Spanish as their primary language. Berwyn has approximately 56,000 residents and 60% of residents identify as Hispanic. One challenge at the Little Village/Berwyn project site is that it is unusual for parents of young adults, particularly young adults with disabilities, to allow their sons and daughters to spend time with individuals outside of their families. This is coupled with the fact that many of the participants in this project did not receive many formalized services; instead they tended to rely on unpaid family supports. Some individuals were on the PUNS list, but others may have been ineligible for formalized disability services based on citizenship status.

Results and Outcomes

Training Evaluations

Training sessions for the Bridge Builders included information on person-centered planning, common obstacles that people with disabilities experience, disability etiquette, and asset-based community development principles that apply to the present project. Trainings were conducted at all three project sites, with a total of 37 Bridge Builders completing the evaluations. An interactive approach was used, including small and large group discussions, role-playing and the use of videos. Overall, Bridge Builders were highly satisfied with the presenters' knowledge, the quality of the materials, and skills on building relationships with people with disabilities. When asked what they liked best about

the training, one Bridge Builder said, *“Thinking about how to really listen to dreams and aspirations of persons with disabilities and how to support them. Understanding how isolating it can be to be a person with disabilities.”* Another Bridge Builder commented, *“Trainers were very informative and created a comfortable, trusting environment.”* Other common responses emphasized the group interactions, the training materials used, including the use of personal stories, and the emphasis on a person-centered approach to working with people with disabilities. When asked how the training could have been improved, responses included: *“Possibly having persons with disabilities participate and share their experiences,”* *“More info on how we will initiate these relationships,”* and *“provide more information in Spanish.”*

Matched Pre- and Post-Test Results

The pre- and post-test surveys (n=37) were designed to capture changes in a number of measures regarding the extent to which confidence, knowledge and attitudes about people with IDD changed as a result of having attended the training. Using paired t-tests, participants’ responses to both the pre-training survey and the post-training survey were matched to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the responses.

To assess the confidence level of training participants, we asked participants to mark how strongly they agreed with the following four individual items that were combined into a Confidence Scale.

Confidence Scale:

I feel confident in my....

- Knowledge of how to interact with people with intellectual disabilities.
- Ability to communicate effectively with people with intellectual disabilities.
- Comfort level in interacting with people with intellectual disabilities.
- Ability to ensure that the person with intellectual disabilities is supported to make self-determined choices in the community.

Alpha reliability for the Confidence scale was .88, which demonstrates strong internal consistency of the scale measuring this concept. Prior to the training, the mean score on the Confidence Scale was 1.80, and after the training, the mean Confidence Scale score was 1.45. All scales and subscales are negatively coded, so lower scores mean higher confidence. The difference between the pre- and post-tests indicates a significant difference between these two responses ($p < .000$, $t = 5.49$, $df = 36$). **In short, this shows that the training led to a significant increase in confidence regarding interacting with people with intellectual disabilities.**

We also wanted to measure whether the training had an impact on attitudes about people with IDD. For this measure, we adapted a well-known and previously validated measure, the Mental Retardation Attitude Inventory-Revised (MRAI-R) (Antonak & Harth, 1994). We did not include the full measure, but chose the most applicable subscales, in addition to updating and simplifying the language of the subscale items. Given recent literature suggesting that contact and knowledge, both part of the designed outcomes of the training and overall project, are possible predictors of attitudes about people with IDD, we also drew on McManus et al.'s (2011) contact scale to explore whether the perceived amount and quality of contact training participants had with people with IDD changed as a result of the training.

We divided "attitudes toward people with IDD" into four subscales. The first subscale was attitudes about integration.

Integration subscale:

- We should integrate people with intellectual disabilities and without intellectual disabilities into the same neighborhoods.
- It is a good idea to have separate after-school programs for children with intellectual disabilities and children without intellectual disabilities.
- Having people with intellectual disabilities and without intellectual disabilities work at the same jobsites would be beneficial to both.

The alpha reliability for the Integration subscale was .454, which is a fairly low internal consistency for this concept. The mean pre-test score on this

subscale was 1.59, while the mean post-test score was 1.48. The difference between these scores **did show a small increase in positive attitudes toward integration for people with IDD, although the difference was not statistically significant** ($p=.173$, $t=1.389$, $df=36$).

Social subscale:

- I am willing for my child to have children with intellectual disabilities as close personal friends.
- I have no objection to attending movies or a play with people with intellectual disabilities.
- I would rather not have people with intellectual disabilities live in the same apartment building as me. (Reverse Scored)

For the Social subscale, the alpha reliability was .77, which indicates fairly strong internal consistency for this concept. This subscale measures attitudes about social interactions with people with IDD. Here, the mean score on the pre-test was 1.22, and the mean score on the post-test was 1.12. Recalling that all of the subscales are negatively coded, this means that **there was a small increase in positive attitudes about social interactions with people with IDD, though it was not statistically significant** ($p=.078$, $t=1.815$, $df=36$).

Rights subscale:

- Regardless of his/her own views, a private preschool director should be required to admit children with intellectual disabilities.
- Laws requiring employers not to discriminate against people with intellectual disabilities violate the rights of someone who does not want to associate with people with intellectual disabilities. (Reverse scored)
- Real estate agents should be required to show homes to families of children with intellectual disabilities regardless of the desires of the sellers.
- Campground and amusement park owners have the right to refuse service to anyone, even if it means refusing people with intellectual disabilities. (Reverse scored)

The alpha reliability for the Rights subscale was much lower (.25), and demonstrated a low internal consistency for this concept. It is possible that the two reverse-scored items may have confused respondents, causing the answers to be inconsistent with the overall concept. The mean score for this subscale on the pre-test was 1.7, and the mean score for the post-test on this subscale was 1.44. This difference was statistically significant ($p=.006$, $t=2.922$, $df=36$), **meaning that positive attitudes towards people with IDD's rights increased as a result of the training.**

Belief subscale:

- People with intellectual disabilities are not yet ready to practice the self-control that goes with social equality with people without intellectual disabilities. (Reverse scored)
- Even though children with intellectual disabilities are in public school, it is doubtful they will ever gain much from it. (Reverse scored)
- The problem of prejudice towards people with intellectual disabilities has been exaggerated. (Reverse scored)
- Even with equality of social opportunity, people with intellectual disabilities could not show themselves equal in social situations to people without intellectual disabilities. (Reverse scored)

The Belief subscale, with an alpha reliability of .628, shows moderate internal consistency for this concept, which explores attitudes related to commonly held beliefs about people with IDD's capacities. The mean pre-test score for this subscale was 1.6, and the mean post-test score was 1.46. **While not statistically significant** ($p=.013$, $t=2.614$, $df=36$), **this demonstrates that respondents' positive attitudes about the capacities of people with IDD increased marginally as a result of this training.**

We also asked respondents to self-report on the amount and quality of experiences they had with people with IDD. Here are the combined items for these subscales:

- In the past, I have interacted with individuals with intellectual disabilities in many areas of my life (e.g., school, friends, work, clubs).
- I have a close family member with an intellectual disability.

- In the past, I have rarely interacted with individuals with intellectual disabilities.
- In school, I had frequent interactions with people with intellectual disabilities.
- I have a close friend with an intellectual disability.
- In the past, my experiences with individuals with intellectual disabilities have been pleasant.
- Over the course of my life, I have had many friends who have intellectual disabilities.
- The experiences I have had with people with intellectual disabilities have been fun.
- I experience anxiety when I think about spending time with people with intellectual disabilities.
- I feel confident in my ability to interact with people with intellectual disabilities.

We would not expect there to be a significant difference between these pre- and post-test answers, though we did observe a small increase in how respondents reported both quantity and quality of past interactions with people with IDD. For the quantity subscale, the mean score on the pre-test was 2.26, and the mean post-test score was 2.23. For the quality subscale, the pre-test mean score was 1.75, and the post-test mean score was 1.68. Alpha reliability for both the quantity subscale (.709) and the quality subscale (.713) indicated fairly strong internal consistency of the scale items.

Overall, the training pre- and post-test results suggest that the trainings were effective in their goals of describing the Bridge Builder program, increasing confidence in working with people with IDD, and increasing positive attitudes about people with IDD.

Outcomes for Participants with IDD

Location	Number of Bridge Builder/Participant Pairs
Evanston	6
Little Village/Berwyn	6
Frankfort:	2

Participants at the Frankfort and Little Village/Berwyn sites ranged in age from 18-23 years and all had IDD. In Evanston, participants with IDD ranged from 27-47 years old. In Evanston, there were six participants; Frankfort had two participants, and Little Village/Berwyn six participants, for a total of 14 participants. Participants were, overall, positive about their experiences with the Bridge Builder program. Participants reported that they did a variety of things when they spent time with their Bridge Builders. This ranged from learning how to use public transit, going to the gym together, working on classic car maintenance and film-making, going out to eat, working on public speaking skills, playing music, going to the park, going to concerts, and going to the movies. When I asked Sharon (name has been changed) what she liked about spending time with her Bridge Builder, she told me, *“I was scared, but now I’m not. I ride the bus and train, and go out to eat.”*

Most participants expressed positive feelings about their Bridge Builder, with one participant saying, *“It [being in the program] made me feel like I had a partner for doing things.”* Participants talked about how they had come to trust their Bridge Builder, and spoke about advice or wisdom that their Bridge Builders had offered. Getting to do new things and being exposed to new opportunities was something that almost all participants mentioned during their interviews. The combination of novel activities was combined with the recognition that Bridge Builders were genuinely invested in participants’ lives. When, during an interview, one support person commented that Jake’s Bridge Builder had said that Jake had changed, Jake had a huge smile on his face. When I asked Jake how that made him feel, he said, *“It makes me feel good.”*

Some participants reported that they did not have many interactions with their Bridge Builder, only meeting once or twice over a six-month time period. While these participants were positive about the meetings they did have with their Bridge Builder, they expressed frustration that the interactions were not more ongoing and frequent.

Overwhelmingly, when asked how their lives had changed as a result of the Bridge Builder program, participants told me that they were engaging more in

their communities. They were getting to go places they had not previously been, getting to do new things, and within those opportunities were challenged to learn new skills, such as buying their own movie ticket or initiating going to a concert. One participant, Rosa, (with her mother supporting her) described how during a neighborhood garage sale, she took on the role of coordinating the event through sending out group text announcements and organizing at the garage sale itself. This was not something she had ever done before but felt supported to do so as a result of spending time with her Bridge Builder.

During my interview with Sharon, her parents were present in addition to the Community Connector. As Sharon and her parents talked about the impact that the program had on Sharon, the Community Connector suggested that Sharon could go on to enroll in community college because she thought her language skills might meet the entrance criteria. Sharon's parents were shocked, and had clearly not thought about this pathway before. Sharon responded enthusiastically to the prospect of going to college, and it was evident that the Community Connector took her role seriously in thinking creatively about how to expand opportunities and choice for not only Sharon, but also everyone involved in the program. Another participant talked about how because of his involvement in the program, he was able to express his emotions: *"I usually keep things to myself, but I've been expressing my feelings and emotions, it feels like a weight off my shoulders."*

When it came to challenges or things to improve on in the future, most participants were satisfied with their experiences, except for those who would have liked increased interactions with their Bridge Builders. Many participants plan to continue to spend time with their Bridge Builders even after the project has been concluded.

Bridge Builder Outcomes

Bridge Builders were members of their respective communities, and ranged in age from 23-71. 24 out of 37 Bridge Builders that completed the training identified as White, 10 as Hispanic/Latino, 2 as Black, and 1 as Asian. Of

the Bridge Builders who were trained, 25 were women and 12 were men. Originally, the project intended to engage not only individual volunteers as Bridge Builders, but also partner with community organizations. For several reasons, this did not end up happening, and will be discussed further in the next section. Bridge Builders were predominantly recruited for the program via informal social networks, which were utilized by the Community Connectors. Bridge Builders played different roles depending on their project site. This is partly because of the uniqueness of each community, as discussed above, but these different roles were also developed through each Community Connector's method and style of facilitating relationships between Bridge Builders and participants.

When asked about their experiences, Bridge Builders reported overall positive experiences with their participants. They discussed the activities they did, but also framed their time spent with participants as primarily guided by participants. One Bridge Builder commented, *"At this point we're really not dependent on CIF. Her goal is public speaking, we will continue towards this goal. However, I appreciate the fact that through Jenna's opportunities at CIF, like seeing a tutor, that provides me support for some of the details."* This Bridge Builder has structured the relationship around a specific goal, but also understands the value of additional support provided through CIF or any other source of support. Other Bridge Builders also emphasized that the interactions were tailored around what the participant had expressed in terms of wanting to learn or do. While some Bridge Builder matches were made on the basis of common interests alone, other matches (mostly in at the Little Village/Berwyn site) were also based on personality, temperament and scheduling variables. Many Bridge Builders were also parents of children with disabilities themselves, and several commented that they appreciated the opportunity to get to see what their own child's future could look like. Mary, a Bridge Builder, said *"My child is younger, and I often focus on the future obstacles...now I see a clear future, I know what to do."*

When I asked Bridge Builders about why they decided to be involved in the program, several respondents stated that they had been mentored or

invested in, and wanted to give back in a similar way by mentoring and connecting with young people with disabilities. Others also brought up the importance of community networking and were eager to demonstrate how those networks might make a difference in the lives of the participants. One Bridge Builder remarked, *“If we are willing to give the time [to be] with the kids, we will do a great thing.”* Bridge Builders understood well the value of time spent in the community and social interactions for the participants, and spoke with gratitude and excitement about what they appreciated about their participants.

When I asked how the experience could have been improved, several Bridge Builders mentioned that having a stipend for activities would be beneficial. Bridge Builders also expressed their desire for increased group social activities. Just as some participants were not able to connect with their Bridge Builders, some Bridge Builders also reported that their participants were not responsive to them and they were not able to connect. When I asked them what could have improved this, they mentioned that having more group events where people could get together might have helped. But even for Bridge Builders who were able to make connections with their participants, it was clear that ongoing support for Bridge Builders would have been helpful. One Bridge Builder I spoke with said she felt like she had to “do it on her own.” She was able to form a connection not only with her participant, but also with her participant’s family, but felt that she did not receive enough support from the Community Connector. Another Bridge Builder commented, *“There needs to be Bridge Builder to Bridge Builder communication. It’s a networking opportunity. These are all adults in the community who care enough to be BBs, wouldn’t it make sense to know each other?”*

At the Little Village/Berwyn site, this idea was actually enacted. Because of cultural aspects, parents of participants were reluctant to allow their young adults to spend time with adults outside of the family. In order to address this, the Community Connector developed a monthly training series that families and Bridge Builders both attended. Relationships were formed while at these trainings, and that community grew as participants’ families and Bridge Builders

did more things together. While Bridge Builders did spend one-on-one time with participants, they also went places in groups, such as to the movies or to a park, which was crucial in building trust between parents and Bridge Builders. This bond was further strengthened by the fact that many Bridge Builders had children with disabilities. All Bridge Builders and parents at this site described this group as a family. Several talked about the fact that their biological extended families had not been supportive after their children with disabilities were born. One Bridge Builder said, *“I’m very close with Jessica’s family, we’ve gotten close; her mom confides in me.”*

Some Bridge Builders also expressed that as a result of spending time with their participants, they had changed how they thought about people with disabilities. From envisioning their own children’s futures, to remarking on the depth of thought of their participants, Bridge Builders found the experience intrinsically rewarding and came away with increased knowledge about how young adults with disabilities can live their lives when supported and provided opportunities to participate in community life.

Discussion

Challenges

This project, in terms of both process and outcomes, had many positive results. By applying asset-based community development theories to natural supports for people with IDD, this project demonstrated how creativity and flexibility are central components in providing customized supports. The project has also experienced challenges, most notably in the lower than anticipated number of participants (40 participants with IDD were anticipated, but only 14 actually participated in the program).

In the project’s inception, the organizational component was emphasized, but this did not turn out. Most Bridge Builder-participant pairs were matched according to their interests outside of formal organizations. This was due to multiple factors and challenges. First, although Community Connectors engaged

numerous organizations, shifts in organizational leadership, volunteer focus and readiness posed challenges. Second, matching Bridge Builders and participants took a significant amount of time. It is possible that on some level, attempting to also “recruit” organizations took time away from the time spent working with Bridge Builders and their participants to connect. Third, particularly in the Little Village/Berwyn area, there was resistance from the parents in terms of allowing their children to spend time with someone outside of their family. It did not make sense to recruit partner organizations, because families were hesitant to trust members of community organizations. The Little Village/Berwyn site was able to be effective in part because it recruited Bridge Builders who may have already known the families and had similar experiences as parents of children with disabilities.

Engagement with non-disability specific organizations is likely to be most successful as resources for building social networks and capital for young adults with disabilities when there are particularly motivated individuals within that organization, or when a person with IDD has previous connections with that organization. Also, it is possible that at an organizational level, especially within organizations that emphasize philanthropic, service or charity work, outreach to people with disabilities would only be understood in those contexts. This may have the effect of constraining the extent to which those relationships formed would be based on reciprocal trust and respect. What this project highlights is that while relationships between non-disability specific entities and organizations may be very rewarding, they are also quite challenging. The lessons learned from this project are useful in designing further efforts for engaging non-disability specific community agencies, particularly in light of recent Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) regulations regarding the choice of non-disability specific settings for Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) waiver recipients.

Lessons Learned

1. Good matches may require more than shared interests.

As previously mentioned in the Bridge Builder Outcomes section, some Bridge Builders expressed the desire for more ongoing support. This was expressed by Bridge Builders that connected with their participants as well as those that did not. They mentioned two possible ways to do this: increased contact with the Community Connector as well as more group and community events that would allow Bridge Builder pairs to collectively spend time together.

One site, Little Village/Berwyn, actually ended up anticipating this issue by holding monthly trainings around various issues that the participants and Bridge Builders requested, including one session on bullying. These trainings, in addition to other fundraising events that participants, their families and Bridge Builders all attended, fostered a sense of shared community that went beyond previously established relationships. Bridge Builders, participants, and their families spoke about a strong bond, fostered not only through the time spent together, but also through the united purpose of increasing independence for youth with disabilities. As one Bridge Builder put it, "*The word 'inclusion' is our mantra. We don't want them to feel out of place, we want them to feel like everybody else.*" At this site, the Community Connector spent a significant amount of time supporting both participants and Bridge Builders, acting as a kind of case manager who would help troubleshoot any issues. Her interpretation of the Community Connector role included being present for all group events and actively engaging Bridge Builder pairs to facilitate relationship growth. For example, one participant wanted to attend a concert by her favorite artist. While her parents were initially doubtful about the possibility, the Community Connector advocated for the participant and even attended the concert as an additional support person, going so far as to speak to the security staff to make sure the participant was accommodated.

2. The Bridge Builder relationship has the potential to be effective and transformative in youth with disabilities' lives.

It is clear that this project had a positive impact on participants' lives and that their social worlds have been expanded as a result of this project. Many

participants, particularly those at the Little Village/Berwyn site, spoke of new opportunities that had previously been closed to them, including learning how to take public transit and paying for a meal. Bridge Builder relationships at the Frankfort and Evanston sites were also productive in expanding opportunities for participants, including opportunities to intern at a television production studio, and work on classic car maintenance, among others.

At the Evanston and Frankfort sites, both participants and Bridge Builders emphasized the one-on-one relational aspect of the program for them, in that they enjoyed getting to know each other as people and viewed the program as a kind of “partnership” where both parties were engaged and willing to spend time with one another. One Evanston Bridge Builder shared how her participant invited her to a class on psychodrama that the participant was already planning on attending. Here, the participant simply brought the Bridge Builder into a community activity in which she was already involved. At the Little Village/Berwyn site, Bridge Builders and participants focused more on the activities and opportunities that they did, while also understanding the relational component as not only between the Bridge Builder and participant, but also among the community at large.

3. The expansion of social networks and social capital, while complex, can be accomplished in multiple ways.

When we consider the overall intended outcome of this project, which is to increase social capital for young adults with IDD so that they may be more fully included in the broader community, we can see that this has happened at multiple levels as a result of this project. One-on-one relationships can often be a doorway to building networks of social capital, as can larger group settings that emphasize supported decision-making and full community inclusion. Future interventions can and should explore how successful community-based organizations have been effective in integrating people with disabilities in their work.

Center for Independent Futures is committed to furthering the work of its Community Connectors and Bridge Builders Project, including continued efforts to engage faith-based and community organizations in this important work. Numerous organizational relationships have been cultivated through this project, and need further nurturing and readiness. Growing awareness of this project is peaking interest, potentially engaging the participation of various organizations. Above all, in addition to expanding opportunities and social capital for individuals with IDD, this program has proven powerful in raising awareness and appreciation of inclusion, interdependence and diversity.

References

- Antonak, R. E, & Harth, R. (1994). Psychometric analysis and revision of the mental retardation attitude inventory. *Mental Retardation*, 32(4), 272-280.
- McManus, J. L., Feyes, K. J., & Saucier, D. A. (2011). Contact and knowledge as predictors of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 28(5), 579-590.

Center for Independent Futures is grateful to the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities for its investment in this project, which has had remarkable impact on the lives of participants, Bridge Builder volunteers, and their communities.