A conversation with Nadia Samperi

Nadia works as Margaret's Lifestyle Facilitator and, following on from the presentation of Nadia and Margaret, '*Exploring, trialling and widening horizons: tapping into community',* Family Advocacy was approached by several Odyssey Conference attendees asking a range of questions. The most frequent were "How do we find a Nadia?" and "How can we encourage paid support workers to help facilitate connections?" We had a conversation with Nadia to explore these questions – and others!

How did you first become employed to facilitate social connections?

I was a university student and I saw an advertisement on my university career website. It was clear that it was not anticipated that applicants would have a disability specific background. There was a short blurb about the young man with disability including his various interests and passions and that the role would involve supporting him to do fun things in the community.

Was there an interview? What did the process involve?

After I contacted the man's family I was given a booklet that the family had put together which provided more details about his interests/passions, about his life, family and his support needs. There were also a series of questions for me to answer, relating to such things as my thinking about social inclusion, my belief systems and interests. I then had an interview with the family. During the interview, the more detailed aspects of the man's support needs were discussed as well as the specifics of my role.

What appealed to you about the role?

Prior to seeing the advertisement, I had limited experience or contact with people with disability. When I saw a person with disability walking along my neighbourhood street I wasn't sure if I could say hi, or what to do – I wanted to address this uncertainty and

discomfort that I felt. It also sounded like a lot of fun - pursuing interests that we both shared like sports, film and public transport together!

Did you spend time with the person you were going to support prior to doing so?

We started by spending time together with the family present while we got to know each other. This was a really helpful time to get comfortable with each other and make sure that the young man was ok with me being in that role. It was also a helpful information gathering time for me. The more I knew the more ideas I could develop about things to do. We gradually spent more time with just us doing things together.

What were some of the strategies that you used to facilitate social connections around the first person you supported?

I remember at first I felt quite uncertain about my role and whether I was doing it ‘correctly’. We were doing fun things in the community but I wasn’t being all that strategic about it. The family helped guide me and used money from the individualised budget to send me to workshops run by Family Advocacy. I remember going to hear some international speakers who provided clear guidance that shifted my thinking and made me better understand my role and intentional ways I could go about exploring possibilities. I would definitely recommend that families keep an eye out for relevant workshops that they and people in ‘social connector’ roles could attend.

With your current role, do you work for a service? How does this work?

As Margaret’s ’lifestyle facilitator’ I am officially employed by a service, but I have very limited contact with them aside from sending in my timesheets. With the first family I worked for, *they* sent in the timesheets so I had next to no contact at all with the service. Margaret’s family wrote my position description, interviewed me and continue to provide me with information, guidance and support. I can contact the service if I have something to raise that I don’t feel comfortable talking about with the family, but there hasn’t been a need for this.

I think it’s good to note that it was the family who have been the drivers of negotiating arrangements around my role – it was not something that the service had on offer that they could select. This negotiation and discussion happened from the very beginning, from initial conversations about creating this new role, and continue to happen when needed. For example, the service provided a list of training for me to attend - like First

Aid training and fire evacuation. The family thought this was unnecessary so they negotiated to use training money to send me to something more relevant to my role (such as a Social Role Valorisation workshop).

It's important to think about the structures, policies and suggestions that service providers put forward in relation to these social connecting roles – because for most people and services it is new territory! In fact, some suggestions may damage the role or limit its effectiveness. For example, requiring workers to wear a uniform or suggesting that they could get more hours by working as a casual for the service provider in another role.

How did you assist in building community connections for Margaret?

Again, attending relevant information sessions and workshops was helpful, particularly a workshop I went to about Social Role Valorisation (SRV). I also continue to speak with Margaret's family, as they know Margaret best and have a great deal of knowledge of what might work. Simply spending time with Margaret and finding out where her interests are and who she is as a person has been really important.

I have become very aware that relationships and connections take time and people need to have space to step in and connect. I remember when we first started going to the local craft group Margaret spilt her tea and in an attempt to try and shield her from any embarrassment I hurried forward and helped her clean it up. I look back at that now and think: what a perfect opportunity for someone in the group to step up and give her a hand! If that happened now I would allow space for someone else to step in or ask if someone could show Margaret where to find some paper towels. I guess this goes to show that, like anything, you learn things as you go and that reflection is an important process.

Being mindful to help facilitate conversations is also important. For example, if I know Margaret has something in common with people in the group, I might initiate a conversation about it or prompt Margaret to get involved in a conversation by saying something like "Margaret loves musicals too! You went to see one last month didn't you Margaret?" For this reason, really getting to know Margaret as well as the people involved in any particular community context is a great advantage.

I've learnt that I too become part of the group/community that Margaret is part of and that this is natural. Me being part of the group – rather than keeping my distance - helps me get to know people better and makes it easier for me to find interests that Margaret may relate to. However, I am always aware that the priority is supporting Margaret's relationships and involvement.

As part of this, I work towards making myself increasingly dispensable. Once Margaret is comfortable in a context I start to get a sense of whether I can start withdrawing little by little. After a number of months attending the craft group, I felt that Margaret was very comfortable with the other ladies, and they were increasingly comfortable with her. One night I asked Margaret if she was comfortable with me leaving early, and she replied, “Yes, of course!” (almost as if to say “why wouldn’t I be?!”). Gradually, I left earlier and earlier until now I just go once a month to make sure that everything is going smoothly and Margaret is still being included in the group.

Do you have any strategies/ tips for families when finding a facilitator?

Start by looking within your own networks (and your networks networks) and advertise in places where the type of people you’re looking for might be. This might be on generic career websites, in the newspaper or in more specific places such as the local art centre notice board if you want to engage an arty/creative person.

It could be helpful to write a list of what the ideal match would be and be prepared to let a few things go. Maybe think about the qualities and attributes you are looking for in a facilitator and divide them into essentials – the non-negotiables - and those that would be desirable. For example, it could be essential that the person is female and outgoing, and desirable, but not essential, that they enjoy dancing.

Also, understand that it takes time for relationships to build and flourish. It does not happen right away. Trust needs to grow and there needs to be the opportunity for people to feel comfortable with each other. This means that finding someone who you know will commit is important.

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