

She's Right Where She Belongs

by Annmarie Ruttiman

"For the first time we and Katherine have a sense of belonging. She has a real school to belong to. She even went to a regular dance without her parents. She's not a case anymore. Now she's a person who is a student, who has friends and she goes to different classes like a real teenager." Marthe Woronko, Katherine's mother (1986)

The "circle of friends" around Katherine is an important element in the success of this story because it is in those relationships that Katherine is given the respect and dignity that every individual deserves.

Katherine Woronko is 16 years old. She lives with her parents and her younger brother Stefan in a local neighbourhood. She has several young teenage friends as well as some older friends who enjoy spending time shopping, going out for lunch, working and going to the high school dances together. This may sound very similar to your home but there is one difference; Katherine and her family have had to fight for her right to do these things and continue to struggle and celebrate all that has happened since the spring of 1985.

Katherine spent the first 14 years of her life in segregated schools and was subjected to segregated services for persons labelled "profoundly retarded". Her parents were very concerned with what they saw. The segregated settings only reinforced the myth that Katherine was not "a whole person" and gave a very clear message that she would never be able to participate in her neighbourhood or family life. This was not the kind of life that Marthe and Stan had envisaged for their daughter so they pursued a dream. "We want our daughter to go to a regular high school and get ready for a real life in the community," they said. This was the dream of her parents who saw Katherine as a member of the family with gifts to offer her community.

When Katherine Woronko began her school year in the spring of 1985, she didn't know that she was about to turn an entire school system upside down. I was invited to be a part of Katherine's experience as her "integration facilitator". The integration facilitator breaks down the social, developmental and educational barriers stacked against students with very challenging needs. The process isn't a cure-all or an overnight remedy. It's a gradual move to integration in the school and Katherine Woronko's story shows us how integration is possible for all students. I was quite unaware of how the idea of integration was so new for our traditional school system. However, with Katherine's lack of inhibitions and my boldness we quickly became a part of St. Robert High School's community.

The staff and student body of St. Robert number close to 1600 individuals. All I needed to do was find Katherine "six friends". These students would be called Katherine's "Support Circle". In my mind the relationships had to be genuine. There was no room for those who wanted "pats on the back". The first step was to get to know who Katherine was and the only way that would happen was

if we spent time together. Once I thought I knew her a little bit we needed to find everybody else. There were a great number of loud, enthusiastic young people out there and Katherine and I were going to get to know some of them.

Katherine and I entered into these relationships in a very casual and natural way. The logical place to start seemed to be that we needed to be in the regular classroom and in vital social areas such as the library, cafeteria, or hallway during the break. We found ourselves getting involved in gym, typing, religion and family studies classes. The teachers seemed to be very open and willing to invite us. Over the course of two and a half months, Katherine and I established a support circle of friends which numbered not just 6 but 20 students. All of these people were attracted to who Katherine was, not her labels. This peer support enabled her to move through her day from getting on the regular school bus in the morning to arriving home at 4:00 p.m. with no special assistance other than that of her peers. The "Friendship Circle" (which is what they call themselves) is now in its third year of meeting on a monthly basis at Katherine's home with her parents and advocates to plan and celebrate what is being done or to discuss our concerns over what is not being done at the school.

Nicolina Tersigni is one of those peers. She is 17 years old and in grade 12 at St. Robert. She has become a leader in the group and takes on just about anything you give her to do. She is strong willed and expresses her concerns about people who don't seem to understand why Katherine is her friend. Nicolina has brought out many of Katherine's qualities and in the process has recognized some of her own gifts. The finest gift she has given Katherine is her unquestionable commitment and friendship. Another gift is her ability to share in writing her relationship with Katherine and I asked her if she would share it with you.

"The first time I saw Katherine I thought she was an individual who was loud, not very energetic and always had some adult hanging around her. The first time I met Katherine was not in a class but in the St. Robert noisy corridors. At that time I had been trying to get a different young woman with special needs to open up to me and to the rest of the girls in our gym class. It definitely was a challenge on my part because she tried so hard to build a barrier between herself and anyone who tried to make her feel wanted. With Katherine's relationship it hardly took any special kind of breaking down of barriers, for she was and still is a person who opens up and attracts those who want to be a part of her circle.

"I became a major influence in Kath's life and she did in mine. It happened when I started going home with her once a week. In my heart I feel that I have known Kath for many years. We have been to Montreal together. Her parents left for a conference there ahead of us so Katherine spent her first time ever sleeping at a friend's house with me, not to mention packing and travelling with her friends. We joined her parents two days later. We also went to Winnipeg and Katherine discovered the pains of travelling for the first time on an aeroplane, the waiting in line, waiting to board, waiting to eat and waiting for the pain in her ears to go away on the landing.

"We spent the summer holidays of '87 waking up early

in the morning in order to be downtown at eight o'clock. Kath and I worked as counsellors at a day camp that Annmarie ran. The best time of the day was getting there and back because Katherine is basically a "party" when she is riding on the subway. That summer Kath and I built a one-to-one bond. Some mornings all I had to do was talk and Kath would start laughing. It was probably because she knew in her mind that a subway ride was somewhere not too far ahead. Many times I have been asked by my friends how does Katherine understand me or how do I understand her. You see Katherine doesn't speak verbally. It is unexplainable for there is an unknown power between us that enables us to communicate. Kath has the ability to learn and she has shown us all by picking up some sign language when she wants certain things. (She now signs "drink", "music", and "please".)

"When she first came to St. Robert she needed someone side-by-side with her to lead her in the right direction because she kept her eyes closed and bent over. Today Katherine walks and jogs wide-eyed down the hallways. Katherine has changed physically and emotionally since she came to high school. She has grown stronger by working out with her friends in our school weight room and she has grown emotionally because I can see how happy she is finally by the way she shares her feelings with those who are close to her.

"If Mr. and Mrs. Woronko had decided they could not handle the pressures of parenting a child with special needs we may never have been part of Kath's circle because she would never have had a circle. If I could dream for Katherine I would dream that her life would continue to its fullest as she grows into adulthood and friendships come and go. It is a scary reality to think that her parents won't always be around but that is why it is so important that Katherine has the opportunity to make a life of her very own. Integration should not be an issue and there should not have to be any 17-year-olds like myself trying to get this across to others. Education is not a gift but a right and all needs of any individual should be met. Katherine's parents were told that she would be difficult to integrate, not because of her needs, but because of a long list of labels that Katherine had accumulated in her lifetime. The only labels I see that Kath deserves are "daughter, sister, student and friend". If Kath does not have the opportunity to experience an education that meets her needs she will be bored just the way I am when people aren't teaching me.

"The message I would like to leave for the readers is that integration is not easy but it is a necessity. Building circles is a step to recognizing the challenges in any person's life. The "friendship circle" involves many celebrations but it also works very hard and even sheds a few tears. Kath's circle is a journey and we all work together to reach the goal beyond survival but believing in Kath as a real person who has a lot to share with people in her



Katherine Woronko (second from right) with her friends Lorna Shankey, Daniella Tersigni and Nicolina Tersigni.

life as I do in mine."

Nicolina Tersigni

The circle of support around Katherine was initiated out of a desire to respond to her needs. Her friends, through their involvement, began to realize their own strengths and gifts and how they could co-operate to empower Katherine. Because each of her friends was different they all contributed something unique to her empowerment. I like to refer to them as the "Breakfast Club". Some excel in school while others struggle with academics. The experience of the circle for the people involved reveal to them that each had needs that were not being met. Their relationships with Katherine met some of these needs and at the same time proved to be a source of growing self-confidence.

The Multi-Action Planning System (MAPS) is the planning tool that we, as a team, use to orient Katherine's day. It provides her with a chance to play a significant part in the activities within the classroom. We continue to move from theory to reality as her friends, teachers and myself each witness the progress in Katherine's learning.

Katherine Woronko has taught us a very important lesson in humanity and what it means to be a valued member of society. She invited us to get to know her for her gifts and strengths. I have watched her grow into a young woman and I think she is absolutely beautiful. She supports me by knowing just the right moment to come over and give me a hug. My personal philosophy is that integration does not stop at the school, it is something that is a part of all aspects of life and I try to live my life in a way that promotes integration. I no longer work with Katherine at the school and I like that because now I can just be her friend and she can be mine. She's right where she belongs.... with her "Friendship Circle".