

# **John O'Brien**

**November 15, 1946 — June 27, 2025**

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John William O'Brien died peacefully at his home in Lithonia, Georgia, on June 27, 2025.

John dedicated his life to creating, sustaining, and advocating communities that support every person. He consulted with people with disabilities, their families and allies, advocacy groups, service providers, and governments all over the world.

While he always emphasized the importance of inclusion and the priority of human beings over institutions and rules, he built a long list of professional connections over his seven-decade career. John was a Fellow of the Centre for Welfare Reform (UK) and was affiliated with the Center on Human Policy, Law and Disability, Syracuse University (US), InControl Partnerships (UK) and the Marsha Forest Centre (Canada). John taught at the Emory University School of Medicine and many Universities around the world, including McGill University in Montreal, Quebec; York University in Toronto, Ontario. Keio University in Tokyo (where -he was delighted to report-his lecture was in such demand that it would not fit in the school's facility and his hosts had to rent a Sumo Arena).

John contributed influential ideas to the fields of disability support and disability studies, including the McGill Action Planning System (MAPS), Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH), and the Five Accomplishments. His work is widely used to help build more inclusive and life-affirming communities across the world. He described himself as "an itinerant curious person," and always emphasized that his role was to learn from other people's social innovations, tell their stories, and share ideas to build community.

His writing has been translated into twenty languages. With his beloved wife, Connie Lyle O'Brien, and many other collaborators, John published over a dozen books, hundreds of articles, and a catalog of video workshops. Many of these can be found at <https://inclusion.com/john-obrien-books-videos/>.

John was born in Potsdam, New York, on November 15, 1946, to John Leo and Elizabeth Johnston O'Brien. He grew up with one brother, Timothy James O'Brien. He was educated at Le Moyne College (B.A. in Philosophy), at Syracuse University (M.S.W.), and by the tens of thousands of books he read and collected throughout his life. He had two sons, Sean O'Brien of Canton, New York, and Kevin O'Brien of Tacoma, Washington, and two grandchildren, Ciaran and Finn O'Brien of Canton, New York. In addition to his wife, sons, grandsons, and brother, John leaves behind 2 daughters-in-law, 6 sisters-in-law; many nephews, nieces, grandnephews, and grandnieces; thousands of friends and students; and an uncountable number of books.

He is loved and he is missed.

a remarkable brilliant leader and teacher, what an amazing human being !

**DEBRA MCLEAN**

Jul 02, 2025

**PAUL WILLIAMS**

Jul 02, 2025



He was one of greatest thought leaders of our time. His passing leaves a hole in the world and our hearts. Condolences to Connie and his entire family.

**LESA HOPE**

Jul 02, 2025

Connie and family, please accept my deepest condolences. Thank you for sharing John with us. A giant in terms of his influence in the lives of people with disabilities, families and the people that make up their supports. John's contributions will have lasting ripple effects and reverberations. Always promoting the dignity and humanity of all people, John challenged us to think differently and resist the pressure of systems that would limit individuality and person centeredness.

**TRISH (MCCONAUGHY) BUESCHER**

Jul 02, 2025

Last night I listened to John's voice - anywhere on-line where I could hear him. As always, his voice and the words he spoke gave me strength. I listened as he spoke of belonging, of discovering one's capacity, of creating a path to happiness. I think John's voice with his slow, thoughtful meter will always take me to a place where I once again understand what touches my life's purpose.

**MARTHA R LEARY**

Jul 02, 2025

I remember the first time I met John around 1984. I attended training and was sitting close to him. He looked at me and smiled gently. It's the feeling I remember that there was something special about him. He always made people feel special and included. What a gift. Sending love to you dear Connie and to your family. Rest easy John. Caroline ♡

**CAROLINE BROWN**

Jul 02, 2025

John changed my life, my son's life and those of so many others. Ever grateful.

**JOHN MALTBY**

Jul 01, 2025

**DON FORREST**

Sep 22, 2025

WHO EVER IS READING THIS SHOULD KNOW THAT; This is real and no lies here. Pastor Paul is an honest, truthful, genuine, sincere and a good man. Whoever wants to adopt a child should contact Pastor Paul on his email; Christchurchorphanage@gmail.com because I also adopted my wonderful twins legally from him. They also have a website which you can reach them with; Christchurchorphanage.blogspot.com Thank you Pastor Paul and may God keep on blessing you for the good works.

**JIMMY RICHY**

Jul 04, 2025

Connie so sorry to hear about John's death. Meeting and learning from you both changed my life and I am forever grateful. You and your family are in my prayers. Dave

**DAVID RICHARD**

Jul 03, 2025

I was privileged to spend two weeks in the summer of 1994 learning from John, Marsha, Jack, and Judith. They, and many others at the Montreal Summer Institute, shaped how I provided support from then on. John was a giant. I sought him out to sit and listen whenever and wherever possible. My condolences to his loved ones. His legacy will live on.

**JEFF COY**

Jul 03, 2025

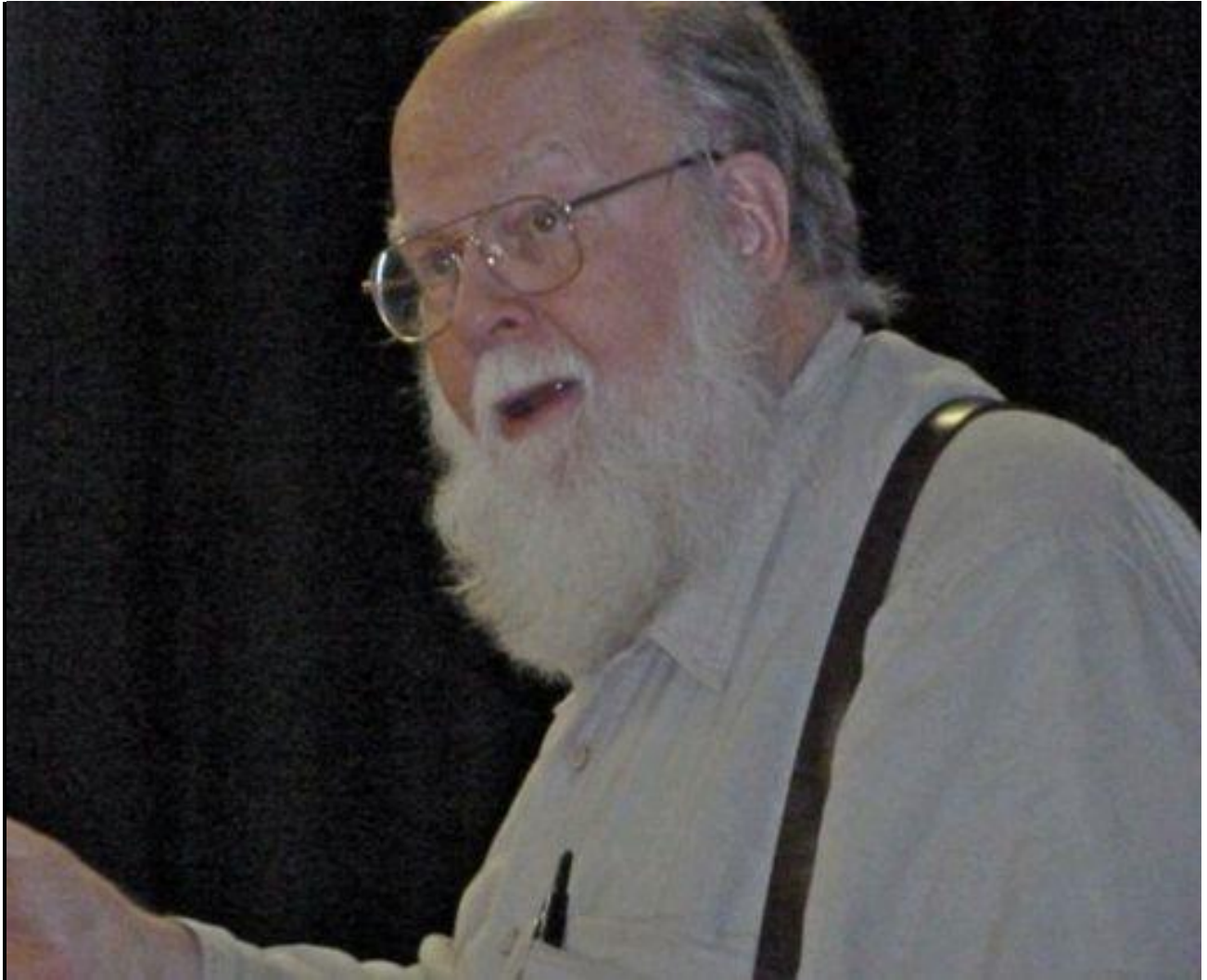
Dear Kevin and family and friends of John, thanks for sharing this lovely tribute about his life. Thinking of you as you begin the grief process.

**KATE BLANCHARD**

Jul 02, 2025







Firstly to Connie, Sean Kevin & all John's family & loved ones, we send you lots and lots of love & thank you so much for sharing John with the world cause he really did make it a better place for so many people and changed people's world for the better. I met John in the late 80s in the North West of England, UK and was proud to become his friend. Lucky Penny my daughter grew up knowing John, sending her books and reading recommendations they shared the obsession of reading and writing. The service was beautiful.

**JULIE STANSFIELD & PENNY ALLSOPP**

Jul 02, 2025

John's work and teachings have impacted the lives of so many it's impossible to capture the immense ripple effect he had on the world. May his memory, and his teachings, be a blessing for us all.

## PHOEBE GOODMAN

Jul 02, 2025

🙏❤️🙏 I loved John O'Briens quiet power and humility. He and Connie were powerful and loving partners in a real way without broadcasting their bonds in any way. He was very generous with his work and with his intention to reach people in order that they would understand their possibilities. He appeared to not grasp the profundity and clarity of his moral imagination of a better more loving and inclusive world. Those of us who were transformed by his work and inspired by his words and his deeds have been changed immeasurably. May John know his worth. May we choose a path of living into our values and our moral stances as John would have had us. May We revel in his gifts and bring it forth in all we do. ❤️❤️❤️❤️🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏

Judith McGill

## JUDITH MCGIKK

Jul 01, 2025

John and Connie came to London at my invitation (well, in those days I worked for the King) in 1979. Like so many of the relationships he made, this proved to be the first of numerous connections that certainly inspired my work for the next (nearly) half-Century. Well, the inspiration continues. I have so many important memories from this 46 years. One that no-one else is likely to mention, captures a lot of what he taught us about 'figuring things out'. In 1987, John published an essay on the importance of leaders being willing to 'embrace ignorance, error and fallibility'. So John, and so unlike what commonly passes for leadership these days. John has left us but his wisdom lives on through our efforts to build communities that work better for everyone. Like many people across the world I shall be joining you in spirit tomorrow.

## DAVID TOWELL

Jul 01, 2025

John had a profound influence on me as I began my career in 1977 in Seattle. Through his questions, he made me truly think about my work in ways that I had not considered. His wisdom and gentle ways were incredible gifts to all who knew him. Sending lots of love to you Connie.

## PAULA JOHNSON

Jul 02, 2025

There are no words to express what a great loss John's death is to the world. But thousands, upon thousands of people knew and valued John's profound work. John had a massive impact on my life and work—opening my eyes to new realities and showing how love can be made real through practical ways of thinking, being and acting. Through John I discovered Hasidic wisdom, the true value of a Home, what helps people find meaning and how we can organise things better (or for worse). Anything I think I've achieved (and that is not a concept John would have had much time for) is a footnote to ideas John shared or illuminated like nobody else. Personally John was the best of friends, offering support, no judgement, encouragement and challenge—with a twinkle in his eye. I loved him.

**SIMON DUFFY**

Jul 02, 2025

**ALAN TYNE**

Jul 02, 2025

Please accept the most heartfelt sympathies of Le Moyne College. We hope the love and memories that you will forever hold in your heart bring you peace and comfort during this difficult time.

**LE MOYNE COLLEGE, OFFICE OF ALUMNI AND PARENT PROGRAMS**

Jul 02, 2025

John told me to always go to the mainstream to find solutions. So seemingly obvious but revolutionary back then and today still not always the norm.

Inspirational 🤝🌟

**MARION SMITH**

Jul 02, 2025

Condolences to Connie and family. A gentle giant that dedicated his life to enhancing the lives of others.

**BOBBY C ROBBINS**

Jul 02, 2025

John and Connie made a profound difference in the lives of people with disabilities and members of their support network including family, friends, supporters in state and local government, schools and direct support agencies in our state (Washington) and many others. John and Connie

brought life to a concept called inclusion. They taught us at a basic level how much we had to rethink what we did every day. They brought passion, joy and reason to our real lives; our work lives; most definitely mine. I am very grateful to have learned from them. I am so sad John is gone. Connie, I am so sorry.

**LINDA ROLFE**

Jul 01, 2025



So sorry to hear of John's passing!

**DICK SPENCE**

Sep 11, 2025

It is impossible to overstate the impact that John had on thinking, policy and practice in relation to learning disabilities here in the UK. From influencing 'An Ordinary Life' (as David Towell has noted elsewhere in these tributes), through his five accomplishments being the cornerstone of practice in every progressive service in the 80s and 90s, to his writings and teachings underpinning the 2001 'Valuing People' White Paper (though the Government officials refused to allow the policy to make direct reference to the five accomplishment), John shaped what we did. As others have said, he was also a lovely person, uncompromising but gentle and was hugely interesting to just sit and talk with. He will be sorely missed but his legacy will live on.

**ROB GREIG**

Jul 04, 2025

Dear Connie and family, my most sincere condolences. Thank you for sharing so much of John and his time to inspire, teach and touch the hearts of so many of us. Listening to Sean and Kevin today, they clearly knew how their Dad was known, appreciated and understood by the world outside of his



family, knew of his many gifts but they so lovingly revealed through their personal and intimate stories how John was known and loved within his family, which I consider another gift of remembrance. With love, Bruce

**BRUCE UDITSKY**

Jul 03, 2025



"Everything you did resonated in our hearts. Now we send God's beautiful servant back into the arms of the Lord. May you rest in eternal peace." From far away in Korea, Francisca

**박선영**

Jul 03, 2025

Dear Connie, Doug and I are thinking of you and your family and remembering how much both John and yourself taught us and influenced our work over the years. John will be missed. 'Ar dheis De go raibh a anam dilis'

**DEIRDRE WATSON**

Jul 02, 2025

I always appreciated how John, in his quiet manner of questions, made me think deeper and work harder towards what was right for individuals in their support. I always believed in individuals planning their own lives and we were there to follow and help make it work. But, John and Connie gave me lots of questions and thoughts and an over all desire to let it flow and be a guide. I will always be forever grateful for John's influence in my life's work. His leadership made a difference to many people, which created an overwhelming ripple effect.

**CHRISTINE (SARBACKER) WITT**

Jul 02, 2025

What a gentle giant who changed the lives of so many. I am grateful I met him and learned from him. Connie I am so sorry for your loss. Much love. 💕

**DEB HOLTZ**

Jul 01, 2025

Connie and family, John touched so many hearts. His words spoke volumes to me. He was loved by everyone's life he touched.

**RIC CROWLEY**

Jul 01, 2025

This is a beautifully written obituary. I had no idea that his work and words reached so many throughout the world. I hope it is a comfort to his wife, Connie and his sons. Sean and Kevin, to know how important his work - and his life - were to thousands of people. So many hearts are breaking for you. Love and Peace

**PAT PUCKETT**

Jul 01, 2025

I had the absolute pleasure of working with John through the Learning Institute for Person Centered Practices. His thoughtful reflections and insights inspired many on their individual journeys implementing a practice that just came natural to John. Every time I met with John, I learned something new. I was usually doing all the talking and he was intently listening. When I would finally take a breath, he would share what he heard, then slowly and deliberately tell a story that shed so much light on what I original thought was such a complex unsolvable issue. He made the process of solving that issue or concern beautiful. I've never met anyone like John before and I'm quite sure I never will again. I'll never forget you, John.

**MONICA ROBINSON**

Jul 02, 2025

Larry and I are very sad and also very grateful to John for all he and Connie did to help Larry get the life he wanted. Larry says "He was a great man" and I agree. Sending much love to all his family from us both.

**ANNE O'BRYAN**

Jul 02, 2025

John O'Brien died a few days ago. He was a good friend. He was brilliant. He was funny. He was generous. I remember seeing him at an event and mentioning to him some ideas for a presentation I was working on. He stared at me and his face took on that mirthful but dangerous look and his right

eyebrow started to move up gradually. Never a good sign. He listened to me until I lost momentum knowing something was amiss. John quietly said; "That is interesting Bob, it is almost like the material I sent you two months ago". My humiliation was almost worth it to just see his muted delight. Recently I did a presentation on Eugenics and its role in the development of human service design principles. I sent the presentation to John after I did it and asked what changes I could make if I presented it again. John's email was again muted but I could sense trouble almost immediately;" Bob, interesting idea following the development of human service design principles historically. You may want to check the number of people you sited dying in the holocaust though. You have added five million to the estimated numbers of people killed by the Germans". I loved being wrong and corrected by John. His use of understatement always cracked me up. At some point, it must have in the 1980's, there was a Western Canada Advance PASS workshop held in Winnipeg. Somehow, I was the local organizer. The morning of the first day went fine. I was feeling like a real event organizer must feel when things are going as they were planned. The first day had a morning session, an afternoon session, and an evening session. Very late afternoon someone handed me a note that someone from the hotel wanted to see me. I exited the room and was met by a hotel staff and about fifteen Chinese men with a variety of instruments. It was explained to me that they had booked the room early to set up and rehearse. I tried the authoritarian panic response 'there must be a mistake!' It failed. I then sent a note up to John at the front of the room. The note said, "Chinese Orchestra has this room booked for 20 minutes from now until 10:00pm. We must exit. Booking error. Please inform Wolf". John read and looked at the back of the room with a bemused look and then passed it on to Wolf who was mid-presentation. Wolf did not take disorganization well at all. He immediately screamed out my name. Well, just my last name. Public humiliation was not new to me, but juxtaposition of a Chinese orchestra and my culpability added an absurdist element that John found hilarious. John was brilliant. He and Connie were leaders and part of a community of thinkers, visionaries, and activists who moved the thinking about personhood and place of people with disabilities in society forward. John was a prolific writer, thinker, innovator, and he left us

with the information we require to keep moving forward. It is an amazing legacy. The fact that he will not be with us to help us think, ponder, laugh, reconsider, try another way is for today a source of great sadness. Thank-you John.

**BOB JONES**

Jul 02, 2025

I had only just had the privilege of meeting John a couple months ago, seeking his advice on a community of practice in Wisconsin. The hour conversation was amazing. He was an incredible man by all accounts. The world was a better place with him in it.

**KRISTY KNOBLE**

Jul 02, 2025

John was an exceptional man who left a mark on unknown numbers of people. He will be missed but most he will be remembered.

**RAY JENSEN**

Jul 02, 2025

John tread softly on his mission. With a quiet voice and kind words, he shattered falsehoods, inspired action, and changed policies, protocols, perceptions, procedures, and expectations. With an extraordinary ability to pursue and recognise wisdom, he was also able to share that wisdom in bite-sized and easy-to-swallow pieces. For those of us who had the good fortune of learning from him, we had the pleasure of being engaged not by some elevated "Expert", "Master" or "Leader" who proclaimed truths from behind a podium, but by a fellow traveller who humbly shared what wisdom he had gleaned along his journey - and who was always alert to discovering yet more in unexpected places. John and Connie's joint impact on bettering the life experience of people with disabilities (and those who support them) is simply immeasurable. John, the world will miss you, but you have changed the world - and what you have planted will remain very much alive and will continue flourish. It was an honour to know you,

**ROB MCINNES**

Jul 01, 2025

Connie, I just heard about your loss, and cannot imagine just how sad you are. Reading the many comments on this guestbook makes me wish I had

been around you both more in the last few decades so I could know him more personally. John was obviously a very special and unique person. You two were missionaries of a sort, and I know you touched many people over the years. I pray for strength, peace, and contentment for you as you carry on without your partner. Love you lots, Linda.

**LINDA PENDERGRASS**

Sep 23, 2025

Hundreds of thousands of people have benefited from John's wisdom. His impact has been global and it will long continue. His loss to his beloved family is unimaginable and we send our love from Sheffield. It was a joy to hear about all the other sides to John that I didn't know about at the Remembrance Service. [I wish we'd talked Rock and Roll one time.] Personally all I can say is that everything I've done or tried to do over the past 35 years has been shaped by listening to John. His ideas and his gentle way of connecting me to other people's ideas will inspire me to keep working, in my own crazy way, to honour his memory. But it was more than the ideas: the twinkle in his eyes, the sense of being seen and his awareness of the frailty of all our efforts, felt like love. I loved John and I'm so thankful to all his family for the support they gave him so that the rest of us could benefit from his work.

**SIMON DUFFY**

Jul 07, 2025



Thank you John. Just thank you. Xx

**SALLY WARREN**

Jul 04, 2025

It was wonderful to see John again, through the loving but clear eyes of his sons. Thanks.



## **ROY FROEMMING**

Jul 03, 2025

So sorry for your loss. You and your family are in our thoughts and prayers.

## **SANDRA SHEPPARD AND THE JESSAMINE PLACE**

Jul 03, 2025

Dear Connie, Sean, and Kevin. Thank you so much for allowing us to be part of John's service today. It meant a great deal. Your two speeches were so amazing and offered so many glimpses into aspects of your dad's life I never knew... such as his culinary abilities. All I remember is that he didn't like sushi! 😊. I met you both at McGill several times and I think one or both of you may have joined Herb and me, along with John and Connie for dinner. Connie, it was so lovely just to see you. Lots of fond memories of times together, especially presenting here around some of Starhawk's ideas on power. And hanging out at McGill with you and Gabrielle and Creighton. I was so touched that Gabrielle Messaged me yesterday to make sure I knew about John. I loved that both your speeches, Sean and Kevin, mentioned your dad and stories. I took a few days to think about what I would Post about him and finally did so this morning on my FB Page and focused on John as a storyteller and the importance of that to me and so many others. You will all remain in my thoughts and heart, along with John. Love, Susannah

## **SUSANNAH JOYCE**

Jul 02, 2025

Dear Connie and family, I was deeply sorry to hear of John's passing. John was a unique human being with enormous compassion, talent and impact on others. His influence on others, certainly including me, was as great as was his humility about the life- and thought-changing effects he had on others. He was especially influential to political and thought leaders across the US and beyond, leading to significant reshaping of public policy in support of the aspirations of people with disabilities to live as independently and productively as possible in homes and communities of their own choosing. John will be terribly missed, but his legacy will endure for a long, long time. Peace to you all. I hope you find comfort in your memories of John and all he did for others.

## **CHARLIE LAKIN**

Jul 02, 2025

Thank you, John, for all the inspiration, courage, and heart. Your quiet leadership, sometimes silent, meant so much. Wishing Connie and the family all the best and warm wishes and fondest memories.

**ANNA ELIATAMBY**

Jul 01, 2025

I consider myself blessed to have benefited from the wisdom and presence of John and Connie in their travels to Washington state. May we all continue to build community knowing John is doing the same in an entirely new realm which continues to feed his curiosity.

**MIKE ETZELL**

Jul 01, 2025

Dear Connie I am so sorry about John's passing. I thank him for how he challenged and helped what I did in my career helping people with disabilities. He was such a wonderful person. So many of us are better off because of John. But more important so many people with developmental disabilities and their families are living better lives.

**RICK TUTT**

Jul 01, 2025