

Building community connection: from feedmill to autism therapy center

In the shadow of the Fennimore water tower sits a nondescript metal building. The once-abandoned former feed mill has now become The Learning Center, a unique resource for youth with autism and their families. Therapy rooms and sensory-friendly spaces, equipment, toys, and lighting are thoughtfully configured. Most rural communities don't have a resource like this, but most communities don't have someone like Rose Cutting.

"Every time I talked with somebody about buying the building, they looked at me one of two ways: like I'm crazy, or I'm a genius," Cutting says.

A mother herself to a teenager with autism, Cutting is the executive director of Aiming for Acceptance (A4A), a non-profit that provides therapies and resources to individuals with autism or sensory processing disorders in southwestern Wisconsin. A4A is housed in The Learning Center.

Cutting set up shop in the space in 2018. Shortly thereafter, she attended an autism conference where she made an integral connection with Gail Chödrön, PhD, the coordinator of community training and technical assistance activities within the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) at the Waisman Center. The UCEDD oversees a broad range of the Waisman Center's outreach, service, and training programs. Chödrön was giving a presentation on transitioning children with developmental delays into the school system.

After the presentation, Cutting introduced herself to Chödrön and says that, from there, a great relationship started between A4A and the UCEDD.



Rose Cutting, at *The Learning Center* in Fennimore, Wisconsin





Aiming for Acceptance (A4A) operates out of the Learning Center in Fennimore, Wisconsin. A4A provides autism therapy services and programming in a sensory-friendly space.

As Cutting worked on establishing her center in Fennimore, the UCEDD provided the knowledge base and access to resources, support, and information on evidence-based practices. “I don’t have to keep trying to educate myself on these things,” Cutting says. “I can call them and I can say, without any judgment, ‘I need help.’ And they say, ‘What do you need, Rose?’”

In working with the UCEDD, Cutting was also introduced to many people working with developmental disabilities including other parents, like her, who needed resources for their children.

Training and technical assistance

The UCEDD training and technical assistance efforts have three main goals: increase the knowledge and skills of professionals and individuals with developmental disabilities and their families through training; make that training accessible to people across the state; and provide problem solving assistance to programs or agencies to improve their services, outcomes, and policies.

According to Chödrön, the combination of both training and technical assistance is important to “move the community forward and make sure that we’re able to support people with disabilities no matter where they are and especially in underserved areas.” Areas like Cutting’s rural community.

“We have a mission to share knowledge and training with everyone who needs it,” Chödrön adds.

The community training portion of the UCEDD is designed to build knowledge and skills and provide access to information that is based on new research.

Free trainings are provided to families of individuals with disabilities, clinicians, students, or teachers. Some of those trainings are universal and could be applied anywhere – such as a new COVID-19 protocol training being rolled out through Waisman Center’s Wellness Inclusion Nursing program. These kinds of trainings are performed multiple times a year in different locations throughout the state.

The UCEDD is also working on new trainings to address specific community requests such as information on access to early autism diagnosis. “We’re trying to improve early identification,” says Chödrön, who is co-leading a needs assessment project to identify the state of early identification and access to early intervention in Wisconsin. “We’re analyzing where the gaps are and for whom there are gaps. What is the state of the state right now? Where are the barriers?”

Through the UCEDD’s technical assistance efforts, Chödrön and her colleagues really get to know a community. “Technical assistance really means offering more intensive help to an organization or an agency,” she says. “It’s not just an individual. It’s an entity and you are helping them change a practice or address a specific challenge.”

Assistance can range from helping community partners secure funding to ensuring an organization is ready and able to address needs of individuals with specific disabilities. For Cutting, it means help with a few things she admits she’s not so good at. “I don’t have to worry about the technology part,” she says gleefully. “Where it becomes work is if I have to figure out Google Docs and all that stuff. Instead, they just say, ‘We’re going to fill it out for you, Rose. You just need to look at it and tell us what to put in.’ It’s wonderful!”



Hamburger and Haircut Lead to Help

Cutting likes to say that her non-profit – and thus relationship with the Waisman Center – started with a hamburger and a haircut.

Fennimore is a small rural community of around 2,500 residents an hour and a half west of the Waisman Center. Cutting says finding access to autism-related resources in such a small town is a challenge. She recognizes that she is lucky that her son was diagnosed so early, but once he turned three, no other professionals in her area had the training to support him. They needed to wait until he was old enough to enter the school system.

“Everybody’s story out here is that the K-12 school system is the only resource they have for children with autism in southwest Wisconsin,” Cutting says. “And that is a little bit like playing Russian roulette because, unfortunately, some of the school districts also don’t have the resources to help get the best quality of life for their students.”

On New Year’s Day 2016, a friend of hers went to the local bowling alley for a hamburger and learned that April was Autism Awareness Month. In a spur of the moment decision, he reserved the bowling alley for an autism awareness fundraiser in honor of Cutting’s son.

“Mind you, I’m not part of this conversation,” Cutting says with a laugh. “I had not heard anything about it.”

Later, while getting his haircut, Cutting’s friend told the owners of the salon what he’d done and they asked if they could be involved as sponsors. “So that is how Aiming for Acceptance started,” Cutting says.

“We started by doing these bowling fundraisers that were so successful that we had to move them to a larger bowling alley in a neighboring town. We just gave the money to schools or to parents to buy sensory items or gas cards to drive to therapy sessions. We did whatever we could because I knew I wanted the funding to stay local.”

But that soon became tiresome. “Why are we giving people gas cards and stuff to drive an hour and a half to these therapies?” she asked. “Why can’t we figure out a way to get these therapies here?”

This sparked the idea that if Cutting created a space right in Fennimore, all of that money that was used on gas cards would be freed up to use in other more immediate capacities. That’s when she decided to rent the abandoned feed mill, build her program, and look for resources and support. Cutting is just the kind of person the UCEDD aims to help.

“I can call them and I can say, without any judgment, ‘I need help.’ And they say, ‘What do you need, Rose?’”





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Gail Chödrön, PhD

Focusing on community

Between July 2019 and June 2020, the UCEDD's community training and consultation work trained more than 6,000 people through 80 training sessions and partook in 700 hours of 40 technical assistance activities.

Chödrön says, for her, it's about transforming a community. "It is not our mission to offer 10, 100, 1,000 hours of trainings or technical assistance. That's not the point. The point is what that training enables to happen. How do we choose what we do with our staff time in a way that best supports the community to take the steering wheel and do what they need to do?"

Cutting emphasizes that A4A is the result of her entire community's efforts. She is still amazed at how her organization has grown. "There is no reason you should be talking to me about special needs and education or anything other than dairy cattle and agriculture," she says. "But because of the Waisman Center, we have credibility!"

With the help of the UCEDD's training and technical assistance, Cutting says she has been able to turn her non-profit into an important community resource that others seek out for assistance for individuals with special needs. Currently, 30-40 hours of therapy services and community programming are offered weekly. Families are from throughout Grant County, but Cutting plans to broaden the reach. She hopes that A4A plants strong roots in southwest Wisconsin and remains a reliable resource for many years to come.



Port of a Harbor by Ole Andersen