

AAC Panel Session

Tracy Thresher

So if it's cool with you I thought we could jump right into to our task at hand and get your speech started and finished during our check in today.

yes that sounds good.

So to give you a frame of reference, I am going to type out the statement Pascal said in his email: He wants you to focus on the successes and challenges with communication including both typing and speech and ideas for effective supports for people who use AAC.

Here is the workshop description: As a panel of AAC users you will tell your stories about the successes and challenges you have experienced with communication in your lives. You will also share ideas on

developing effective supports for people who use AAC.

Good afternoon. As most of you know by now I am Tracy Thresher, newly formed movie star and old time communication guru. I am rightly excited to share my story with you but most importantly my hope for all of you is to help you get started with your communication. For some of you, you have been doing this fine work to develop your communication for a long time. I think the most important thing I want you to take away from this conference is that we are thinking people with a lot to say but unless we have the right communication supports we appear to be something different. I was thinking just now how lucky I am to have a strong team supporting my communication needs. Up until a few months ago, I was back at my breaking point because I had to develop my routine again with yet another new staff. I am fortunate she turned out to

be a wonderful communication partner. However, that has not always been the case. Jeanette has been a quick study and I am at a place in my life where I need her more than ever. Jeanette also supports my sensory needs with long walks, hiking, swimming, etc. I am very much wanting all of you to have the conviction to move one step at a time in a sea of communication possibilities. As your captain, I say let's come up with a plan to get you moving on your ship to AAC success.

I have had communication challenges all of my life and I think it is fair to say that these challenges have helped me build a foundation for my communication. I have had more support people than I can count trying to build this up into something concrete. I think the successes I have had were the dedicated people like my Mom, Rachel and Harvey who have stuck by me even when it got rough. I have used many

ways to communicate; in the beginning I used my behavior because it was the only tool I had. I remember quite a few times when my Mom was ready to pull her hair out. She was my biggest ally and sometimes my enemy in the sense that I could not get all my needs met because I could not tell her. I am at a place now where I can share real thoughts with you and be able to magnify my thoughts by using facilitated communication. This is one of my methods. I am also working on my speech all the time by incorporating it into my daily activities. I started by reading my typing out loud and with this I worked on my rhythm and pronunciation. It was one of the most challenging things I have had to do. It meant that I had to kick old habits with my speech such as talking too fast. It meant I needed opportunities to practice and with high staff turnover this was impossible. I also need to feel comfortable with someone before I am able to work on this skill. I am currently

working on using my voice to make some verbal choices. The person with me must know my impulsive irritating automatics so they can be able to help me regulate my speech. This can get tricky if you do not know my key automatics. For example, I say “Yes” to almost everything however my “No” is usually right on. I need people to avoid using yes/no questions or at least double check my response through typing. I need help with forming words and pronunciation. My voice needs exercise just like my mind and body. I like to think of my voice as an unused muscle that has to be trained. It is my newest challenge. I need to be more independent if I wish to prove my intelligence to the people who think others influence my typing. These are my independent thoughts and I will show the world by speaking and fading typing support. It is my best work yet because it challenges the thinking of those who disbelieve. Right thinking means being open

mind to other modes of communication. One of the biggest challenges is getting open minded supports. I recommend coming to our movie with your support people to show them what communication can do for those who could not verbalize in the past. Larry and I never could have travelled the world without the support of Pascal and Harvey. Our dreams are now possible due to AAC.

Now to move to successes... My first success was telling Mom I wanted to be baptized. I was able to finally have a way to let her know how important church was to me. I was able to have conversation with my minister which helped my depression. I became excited about the possibility of being able to communicate with my family. I wanted to let them know how much I loved them. I had never been able to express my love to them. I saw the joy in their faces. It was my best day in the whole world to let them know I appreciated their sacrifices.

Thinking back on the years of no communication is very sad but it makes me stronger willed. I now have the tenacity to push through hard times. That is key to being successful. My professional life has developed because I have input into what I wish to be doing for work. I used to feel stuck in a dead end job doing inventory at Kinney Drugs. I am not saying that others may not like it but I hated it. I wanted to work as a consultant and mentor. I developed my skills and I am now working in a career of my choice. I also pitched the movie at WAHPAD and Gerry Wurzburg chose to film our adventures in the world. Larry and I are able to make our voices heard through our blog which is posted on the “Wretches and Jabberers” website. I am so pleased that I found Harvey Lavoy who helped me develop my AAC skills. I hope that you find hope and inspiration in my story. Thanks for being here to share this experience with Larry and I.