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## Helping Alaskans with Differing Abilities Experience Hope Since 1968

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November 23, 2020

Dear Friends, Family, & Stakeholders;

“Who taught you about gratitude?” I recently asked this question to an audience of long-term employees and new employees during a welcoming meeting we hold via Zoom. Answers were varied; parents or grandparents growing up in the Depression teaching lessons of gratitude for simple things, lessons of nature, special friends, family members or teachers who lived gratitude each step of their day.

For me there have been many; my mother who modeled and demanded timely thank you notes, my grandfather who taught me gratitude was witnessed in simple acts of love, my dogs who wag their tails with joy at everything. But as we approach Thanksgiving, I reflect on the lessons of gratitude I learned from my friend Duane.

Duane and I met 40 years ago in San Jose, California. He was living in a small institution, and I was a new staff member with no experience working with people who experience disabilities. Duane was born in the 1950’s with Down Syndrome – not an easy path for most. Although I will never know the whole story, Duane was taken in by a kind neighbor who raised him until she passed in the 1970s. She shared with him her love of music, taught him to read, and loved him. Having a childhood in community was more rare than common for those with disabilities, and although we never met, I will always be in awe of her willingness to accept and love regardless of the pressures of the times.

Duane and I became fast friends – I do not know why – it just happened. During the four years I worked with him he taught me so much. A man of few words and normally reserved, he would light up my day when he laughed, called out, “Oh Chel” and ran up to hug me.



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When I moved to Alaska, it haunted me that Duane was still living in that institution. My husband and I found a path to bring him to Alaska where he experienced a robust life of friends, adventures, and employment.

Duane's favorite holiday was Thanksgiving. The recitation of the menu would begin after Halloween. "Turkey, mashed potato, dressing, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie" brought absolute joy to his face, and we shared many holiday meals through the years. Duane never failed to say, "thank you", and I often wondered about the dear woman who raised him. Did she instill the expectation of expressions of gratitude, or was it just his nature?

My dear friend passed on 2 years ago, just ahead of the Thanksgiving holiday. However, grief was quickly replaced with a deep appreciation for this wonderful friendship and the opportunity to share decades of moments together. Duane loved the Beatles, Bee Gees and the Beach Boys – music and a good beat soothed him and gave him joy. He was content with simple pleasures.

I hope each of you have moments to reflect during this holiday season and appreciate the many people who have come in and out of your life and have left you better for their friendship or example. I am a better person for having known Duane - and for his presence in my life I am truly grateful.

Holiday blessings to all,

Michele Girault  
CEO  
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