



The Vodec Voice

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Realizing **Potential**

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Connecting Through Elm: Meet Kim and Willie (and Willie)

News, The Voice | 0 comments



Willie and WhyArts Executive Director Kim Jubenville and a four-footed Willie, Kim's puppy. (This photo was taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.)

Kim Jubenville and Willie have been friends for years. They connect on an almost cellular level through a shared love of music, storytelling and – above all – the stage.

Jubenville is the executive director of WhyArts, an Omaha nonprofit dedicated to providing a diverse array of quality arts experiences to the metro's underserved groups. Willie is a consumer in Vodec's Elm Program, which was founded in 2003 to provide stimulating, progressive activities for adults with multiple disabilities.

The two met and grew to appreciate each other at WhyArts workshops during the past five years. Elm is based out of Vodec's Omaha development center. "I'm sure I met Willie early on, but it took me a while to realize what a treasure he is," said Jubenville, also a local actor. "In the beginning, we did a lot of large group work in Elm where we engaged everyone in the same activity, and we did a lot of visual arts activities," she said.

WhyArts then decided to alternate its visual arts workshops at Vodec with music and storytelling to see if it had an effect on the level of consumer engagement. "The reaction was a big 'aha' for us," Jubenville said. "Of course people react differently to different opportunities – we just needed to get to know the consumers better."

Several years back, Jubenville planned to lead a music session in Elm – complete with instruments and other supplies – but after she had everything set up, the CD player wouldn't work. Read the rest of the story, in her own words, below.

Suddenly I had to go to Plan B, so I started to weave a story. Willie rolled up and wanted a part – if I remember correctly, it was the big bad wolf from "The Three Little Pigs." At first I was nervous about not being able to understand Willie's speech, but he was so patient with me and had such a good sense of humor that the workshop ended up being a big success.

Eventually Willie offered to lead a story with me as his narrator. Then we added music, and the productions got more elaborate. Our last production of "The Lion King" starred my new puppy (also named Willie) as Baby Simba.

Willie has starred, spun and shared many stories over the years with the Elm group, and it's given the other consumers more trust in participating with us. Willie is highly gifted, and I'm not kidding you, he understands Joseph Campbell's classic "The Hero's Journey" at a graduate level. He's sharp and sassy and definitely not short winded!

I look forward to sharing a lot more stories with my Elm buddies.

Coping with COVID-19: Virtual Connections Fill the Void

News, The Voice | 0 comments

James and Deb are tele-buddies. They touch base for about 30 minutes each weekday via Zoom, one of the software-based video and audio conferencing systems that's acting as a lifeline for businesses, families and others trying to stay connected during the COVID-19 crisis.

James is James Ramsey, a Day Services Assistant at Vodec's Central Iowa site in Urbandale, Iowa. Deb is a Vodec consumer who normally attends Central Iowa's Cares program, which provides a variety of experiences that immerse consumers in community life.

When Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds issued a state of public health disaster in mid-March that forced the closures of establishments across the state, that meant Deb had to stay home. It quickly became apparent the closures could last months, not days, so staff turned to technology to help fill the void.

Before the COVID-19 closures, Ramsey's workday included helping consumers make progress on their individual goals, participating in on-site activities and off-site excursions, and assisting with meal preparation and other consumer needs.

Today, he's the kind face and reassuring voice on Deb's computer screen when it's time for "Virtual Vodec." On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the topic is stretching exercises. Deb uses a wheelchair as her primary means of getting around but also has a walker. These sessions are designed to help Deb improve her mobility so she opts for the walker first and becomes less dependent on her wheelchair.



James Ramsey

During a recently-observed session, Ramsey looks the part, dressed in a comfy sweatshirt and baseball cap. He demonstrates a series of movements and instructs Deb to mimic his actions, starting out with simple stretches and adding complexity as they go. His directions – delivered in a clear, calm and encouraging voice – are interspersed with questions for Deb (“Do you feel that?”) and encouragement when she completes a move (“You’re doing great!”).

Deb’s a gamer. She’s quick to follow along, responds to Ramsey’s questions with enthusiasm and smiles her way through the entire session.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Ramsey helps Deb learn sign language or demonstrates a craft activity he thinks she’ll enjoy. If they have time, they work in a quick game of *Jeopardy*, one of Deb’s favorites. Before they sign off, the two friends chat about Deb’s day, how she’s feeling and if she needs anything from Ramsey before they check in again the next day.

The sessions end with a virtual fist bump.

“Deb is wonderful, kind and compassionate with a lot of determination,” Ramsey said. “The first day I see her in person again, I’ll tell her how much I’ve missed her and give her a handshake or high five – if it’s allowed.”

Tina Hardy, Vodec’s Day Services Supervisor in Central Iowa, said “Virtual Vodec” empowers consumers to work on their goals despite having limited physical contact with other people. “Our staff is excited to be able to help our consumers cope during these unprecedented circumstances,” she said.

Vodec offers its Cares program in Urbandale, Council Bluffs and Omaha. For more information, call 712.328.2638.



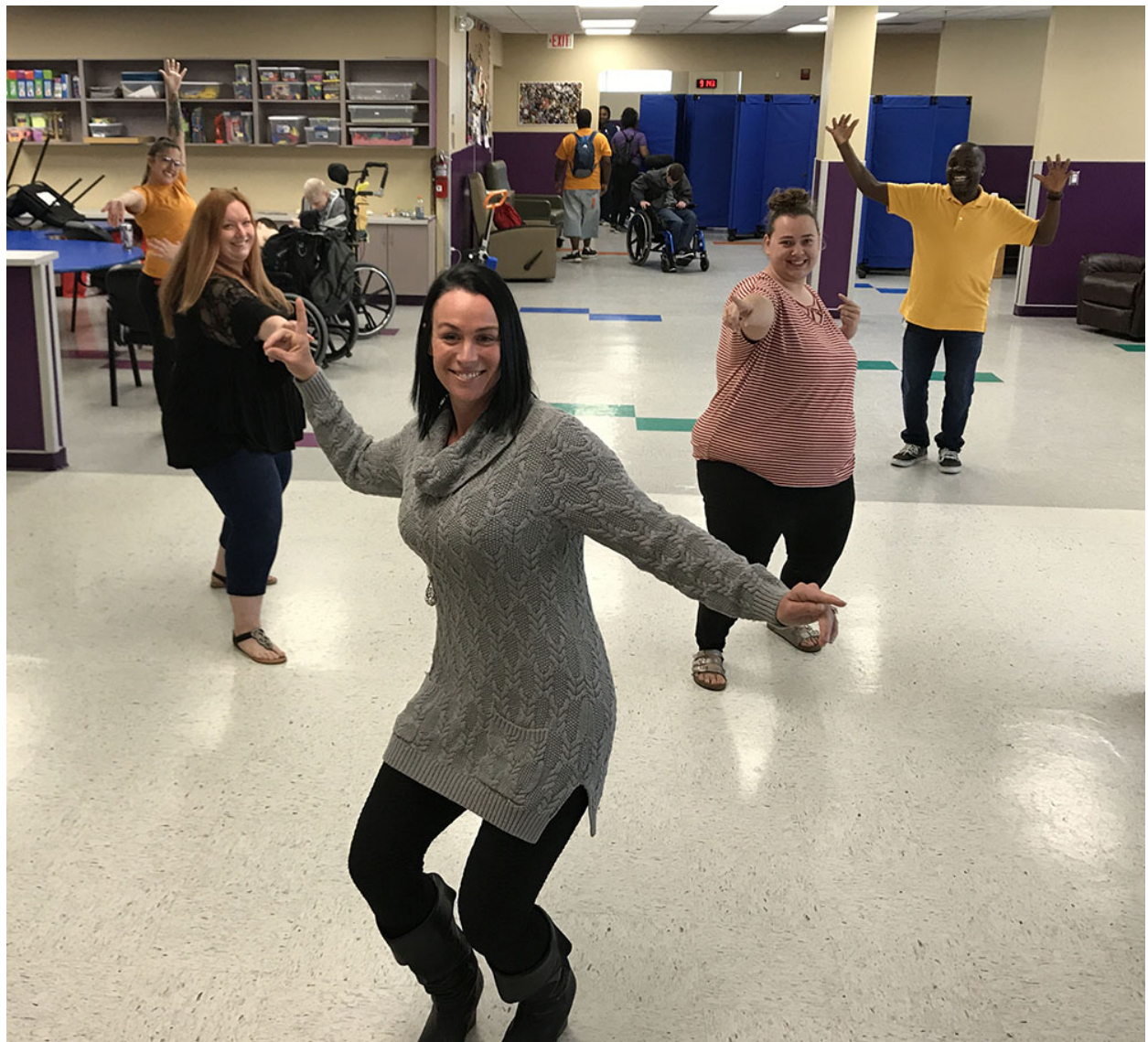
Deb, a Vodec consumer.

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Mission, Vision + Principles	Donate	Q&A	Services		News
History					Our response to COVID-19



Elm Program Helps Consumers Grow at Their Own Pace

News, The Voice | 0 comments



The veteran Elm team in V formation. From the back left of the V: Izrael Hartshorn, Megan Davidson, Beth Joslin, Makayla Camden and Kayode “Kay” Akomolafe.

Founded in response to real-world need. Staffed by individuals with compassion, integrity, leadership, creativity, accountability, patience and kindness. Ready to adapt to a changing world to meet the needs of those it serves.



Vodec’s Elm Program (Elm stands for “Exceptional living with multiple disabilities”) was founded in 2003 by a group of parents seeking a safe place for their children to go during the day – one that would allow them to work on their habilitation goals while encouraging them to connect with others and explore the world that begins right outside their own front doors.

“We’re here to help our consumers live the exceptional life that each of them deserves,” said Megan Davidson, Nebraska Day Services Supervisor.

Today, Elm serves more than 35 consumers from Douglas and Sarpy counties. In recognition of its 15th anniversary in 2018, the program’s physical space in Omaha underwent a dramatic transformation. Confining walls were demolished, remaining walls were painted in a vibrant and welcoming color palette, adaptive equipment was upgraded, the activity supply closet was stocked, and new learning tools were purchased.

It’s the relationships and individualized attention, though, that keep Elm consumers coming back year after year. Some have been attending since day 1. “We make it a big point to share laughter, smiles and fun,” said Beth Joslin, Nebraska Day Services Manager responsible for the program.

For more information about Elm, email bjoslin@vodec.org.



Steve's Corner: The Impact of COVID-19 and What I've Learned

News, The Voice | 0 comments

by Steve Hodapp

The novel coronavirus – called COVID-19 or 'Rona' by some – still has its grip on the world. I continue to be mystified by how such an itty-bitty thing can have such a huge impact. The health crisis was enough. Then came the economic crisis with record numbers of people unemployed and businesses closed for now or forever.

Trying to catch any news that isn't about COVID-19 is a challenge. It's depressing and creates anxiety. Yet here I go using it as a launch point for this column, but I want you to know how the pandemic has impacted Vodec.

The first impact is on our consumers. Some residential consumers were displaced from their homes to temporarily live with family. If families felt this was the safer environment, then so be it.

As this issue of THE VOICE went to print, consumers in our Iowa day services are restricted from attending on-site services by proclamation of Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds. Consumers in our Nebraska day services were not similarly restricted. But about half of them either chose to self-isolate at home, or the choice was made for them by families or residential providers other than Vodec.

Every day I hear about consumers wanting to return to services. They miss their friends. They miss their activities. They miss their work. And we miss them! We all look forward to when we get back together again.



Consumer absences also have a financial impact on Vodec. Fewer consumers in services translates into less revenue. Simply put, no service used, no revenue for it.

Below are my takeaways and observations in no particular order. Some came to me out of the blue, while others came in strings through free association. A few struck me as being very dark, while others made me smile (maybe you, too). Some just made me sad. I imagine these may be similar to some of yours, and you likely have more to add particular to your experiences.

As I finished this list, there was a lot of chatter about opening up the states again. I'm hopeful the decision-makers make decisions with good outcomes. What do those look like? By opening up, I think the decision-makers' #1 desired outcome is economic recovery.

My hope is this does not have the negative impact of worsening the health crisis. Only time will tell.

Here goes...

- I learned how to wear (and even make) a face mask (like the American Express card, don't leave home without one).
- Clorox wipes are good, but the little dispenser hole at the top of the container sucks.
- Zoom, GoToMeeting and Facebook Messenger help with the loneliness.
- A distance of six feet distance is not the same for everyone.
- I get dirty looks in grocery stores when I misjudge six feet.
- Too many people are dead because of COVID-19.
- Too many families are grieving because of too many dead.
- Too many health care providers are being traumatized by too many dying patients.
- My late parents' stories of living through the Great Depression are resonating with me.
- People are extremely creative with their homemade masks.
- I find governors' press conferences more interesting than I thought I would.
- I have a renewed appreciation for my team of directors, who aren't afraid to give me input.
- I admire our employees who keep showing up, even if it's to paint (straight!) stripes in parking lots and work floor walkways.
- I am grateful for a board of directors who express appreciation for me (THANK YOU).
- I feel awful telling families they cannot visit their son, daughter, brother or sister because they may bring COVID-19 into the residential setting.
- I'm thankful for having a temperature below 100.4 degrees (thanks, Kasey, for taking my temp every day).
- I'm irritated as I still wait for the thermometer I ordered through Amazon.
- It's eerily quiet without consumers at our Council Bluffs and Urbandale centers.
- I'm realizing our elected officials are human as I watched Gov. Reynolds break down during a press conference when announcing the numbers of dead.

- I wonder if the hoarders who cleared store shelves realize half the stuff they bought has expiration dates.
- I realize how lucky we are as Vodec employees that we're an essential business while unprecedented numbers of people are recently unemployed.
- I miss hugs.
- I miss shaking hands. Will we ever do that again?

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The following list reflects donations to Vodec from Feb. 22, 2020 to April 15:

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The Many Faces of Elm: Meet the Calendar Man

News, The Voice | 0 comments



Brandon and Elm's Noelle Heaton (taken prior to the onset of COVID-19)

If you tell Brandon your birth date, he can tell you what day of the week you were born, along with what day your birthday will land on in the current year. At Vodec, he's known as The Calendar Man, and if you're lucky enough to meet him, he just might ask you without prompting.

Brandon has been attending Vodec's Elm Program since 2006, the year he graduated from Burke High School. When he's not busy spelling, smiling or learning new vocabulary words, he works on increasing his mobility and socialization skills with the help of Elm staff.

"Brandon takes pride in his mobility, especially when transitioning into his stander each day," said Megan Davidson, Nebraska Day Services Supervisor.

He recently began using a new method of "pivot transfer" out of his wheelchair by using an Etac Turner PRO, a mobility device that allows consumers to turn safely with standing support. "It taught Brandon the responsibility of using his own strength during a transfer, therefore relying less on the strength of staff who assist him," Davidson said.

The Elm program has helped The Calendar Man overcome a number of challenges that relate to expressing himself. "Over time, Brandon has become more aware of his triggers – loudness and repetitiveness – before escalating into crisis mode," Davidson said. He's also learned to make use of his noise cancelling head phones, which he keeps in his backpack at all times.

How do you characterize this extroverted, interesting consumer in a few words? Davidson settles on intelligent, detail oriented and social. And lovable – that's a big one.



Brandon is an avid speller and loves to learn new vocabulary words.

3 Questions for Brandon's Guardian

Vodec: How did you hear about Vodec and the Elm Program?

When Brandon aged out of Burke High School, they recommended Vodec's Elm Program for him.

Vodec: How important is Elm to Brandon's overall well-being?

Brandon loves Elm and looks forward to it every week. I feel the socialization and therapy he receives is very important to him. He really enjoys everything Elm has to offer.

Vodec: Would you recommend Elm to others?

Absolutely! I think the program is wonderful, and the consumers in the program benefit greatly from having it available to them.

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