

## A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE: HOME AT LAST

By Jeffrey Symes  
One Sky

Given his defiant struggle with schizophrenia and his history of homelessness and institutionalization, most people in Frank Caswell's position are deeply embedded in the human services system for needed supports. Caswell, who is also blind and makes use of a wheelchair, has Robin Carlson.

As an outspoken advocate for people with disabilities and the Direct Support Providers (DSPs) who care for them in New Hampshire, Carlson has earned a name that is not always a welcome sound in the halls and conference rooms of state agencies. But for all the speeches and written words she has delivered over the years, Carlson has done more than talk. For almost 30 years now, she has walked the walk with Caswell.

Last year, she helped Caswell celebrate his 80th birthday with a party attended by friends and not paid staff. It was a detail that meant everything to Carlson. "How many people I can get around his birthday table determines my success as a support provider," she says.

Genuine friends at gatherings becomes an important measure for anyone who has worked at transitioning Laconia State School inmates into communities. Other than family, most of the relationships inmates had were with people paid to know them. Receiving supports under a Participant Directed and Managed Services (PDMS) program with One Sky Community Services, Caswell and his support team of friends and neighbors get to decide what supports best suit him.

Recently, that care and support has had to be



**FRANK CASWELL SHARES A MOMENT WITH HIS DIRECT SUPPORT PROVIDER RACHEL CARLSON ON ONE SKY COMMUNITY SERVICES.**

intensified. This past April, Caswell was admitted into hospice care at the only home he's known for much of his life - as Carlson's housemate.

The two met in 1989 when Caswell lived in a group home in Dover under the care of the former Strafford Guidance Center and Carlson was a residential coordinator with the former Developmental Services of Strafford County (both organizations now comprise Community Partners, based in Dover.)

Part of Carlson's job involved regular visits to the Laconia State School as the institution wound down its operations. But it was just the beginning of Caswell's life with Carlson and her family. "I'm not unique," Carlson asserts. "It's just seeing people for who they are and making a commitment to them."

Caswell had his own memories of Laconia. He was institutionalized there in 1944 as an 8-year old boy and was discharged three years later to the

care of his grandmother when she found out he had contracted polio. As a young man in his 20s, schizophrenia appeared but Caswell managed to drive a car, keep apartments, and hold down various jobs.

Until 1971.

That year, without a word to anyone, Caswell left his job, walked out of his Dover apartment, and disappeared. For 17 years.

A social worker named Martin Phillips at Eastern State Hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia where Caswell had been a patient for nine months tracked down Caswell's family roots in NH. After sharing stories of hitchhiking, panhandling, and living in shelters and institutions across the country, Caswell remembered his father's name and Phillips tracked down Caswell's sister, Patricia Brewer, in Rochester. The two were reunited in 1988 and Brewer served as her brother's legal guardian until she died some years ago.

One of the few people who can translate his whispering rasp of a voice, Carlson says that Caswell shares bits and pieces of what he might remember of those lost years, but that he speaks mostly of intense loneliness and isolation. Since finding a home with Carlson, he has been far from lonely or isolated. Over the years, she has stuck by his side, whatever Caswell was doing and however he was doing it - whether he was making neighbors uncomfortable who saw him kneeling on the front lawn, smoking, or whether he was cursing out loud in front of everyone from doctors to waitstaff.

Carlson calls him "the most authentic person I know" and sees him as a wise man with an untold depth of hard, life experience who has a lot to offer the world. And as she has been doing for decades, Carlson is making sure Caswell has a home in that world.

"Love and care for people," Carlson advises, "but don't hog them. Share their gifts."



*Incorporated in 1983, One Sky Community Services has been dedicated to providing a comprehensive array of services, supports and programs to individuals and families with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as acquired brain disorders. A private 5013C nonprofit organization, it is the designated area agency serving the following communities: Brentwood, Deerfield, East Kingston, Epping, Exeter, Fremont, Greenland, Hampton, Hampton Falls, Kensington, Kingston, New Castle, Newfields, Newington, Newmarket, North Hampton, Northwood, Nottingham, Portsmouth, Raymond, Rye, Seabrook, South Hampton and Stratham. One Sky works with nearly 1,200 individuals and families on a yearly basis.*