

THE VOICE

Spring 09

Official Publication of the New York State Recreation and Park Society, Inc.

HIGHLIGHTS

**69th Annual Conference
and Business Expo**

PAGE 7

**Leadership:
Meaningful Service and
Engagement for All**

PAGE 27

**Consolidation vs.
Local Control**

PAGE 31

Bigger, Better Bottle Bill

PAGE 33

ALSO...

Funding Opportunities

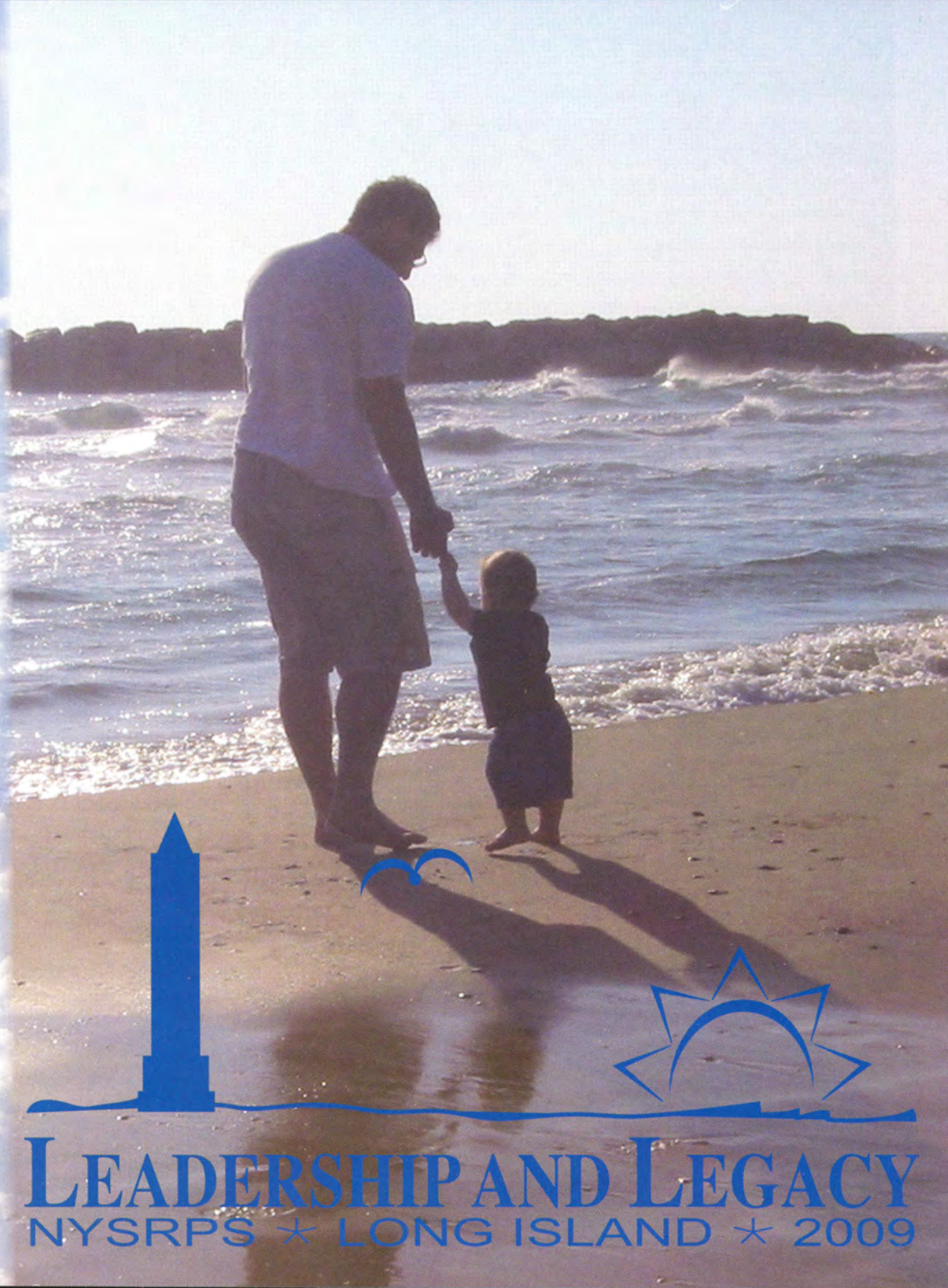
PAGE 35

**Honoring
Michael Oropallo Jr.**

PAGE 40

**Amusement Park Ticket
Consignment Information**

PAGE 41



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LEADERSHIP AND LEGACY
NYSRPS * LONG ISLAND * 2009

Leadership

MEANINGFUL SERVICE AND ENGAGEMENT FOR ALL PEOPLE



You have certainly heard of most of these people: John F. Kennedy, U.S. President. Robert Kennedy, U.S. Senator. Juliette Gordon Low, founder of the Girl Scouts. Abraham Lincoln, U.S. President. John Lennon, musician and peace activist. Wilma Mankiller, Chief of the Cherokee Nation. David Paterson, Governor of New York. Christopher Reeves, actor and disability advocate. Janet Reno, U.S. Attorney General. Franklin Roosevelt, U.S. President. Helen Keller, activist and humanitarian. Winston Churchill, Prime Minister, Great Britain. Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France. Max Cleland, U.S. Senator. Temple Grandin, professor at Colorado State University. Chris Burke, actor, musician, and inclusion advocate.

What do these people have in common? The obvious answer is that we know these famous people as *leaders*. In varying walks of life, these leaders are well known and each has made a lasting impact on our world in a large or small way. What many people may not know is that the people listed also share another commonality – they all had or have a disability.

Often, as professionals in parks, recreation, and therapeutic recreation, we fall into thinking of people with disabilities as being the recipients of services led by us, or being in need of volunteer assistance in our programs or parks. We may unintentionally think of people with disabilities as less capable than the staff and volunteers we hire and train to be leaders. People with disabilities are often viewed as passive recipients

of our good and charitable efforts, not as givers or leaders of services or programs.

I would like to challenge us to shift our thinking, and begin seeing each

person that uses our parks, our programs, and our services, whether they have a disability or not, as being potential leaders and potential volunteers or staff. The preceding list of people shows how little disability can predict great leadership potential. What can predict leadership and service are the abilities, talents, and strengths that people bring to our agencies, regardless of disability.

Most of us take on leadership roles or volunteer positions to contribute in a meaningful way to our neighborhoods or communities. The benefits of being civically engaged, and providing valuable community service are well documented. As individuals, we often receive much more than we give when we help others. If, as professionals in a position to make a difference, we don't make every effort to extend the same leadership and volunteer opportunities in parks and recreation to people with disabilities, we in essence deny them positive life experiences that people without disabilities are privileged to access. We perpetuate an old discriminatory paradigm that casts people with disabilities as charity cases passively receiving assistance.

What concrete steps can you take to extend an invitation to people with disabilities to volunteer or provide leadership in your parks and programs?

- First, make sure your facilities are physically accessible

so that all people can actually approach, enter and fully participate in the activities at your agency.

- Tap into the pool of current participants in your programs or services as a starting point to encourage volunteering or leadership. For example, do you have a teenager with a developmental disability who has attended your summer playground program for years, and would be ready to begin to volunteer or be hired as a leader?
- Find out the interests, talents, and strengths of each person who wants to get more involved at your agency as a leader or volunteer. Don't focus on what the person can't do – what the label or diagnosis is. Focus on what the person can contribute. Every person brings different strengths, and your role is to match individual strengths to program or agency needs for volunteers or leaders. This careful matching will provide a personally satisfying experience for volunteers, and valuable service for your agency.
- People with or without disabilities want meaningful volunteer and leadership experiences. Always ask, *Is this something I would want to spend my valuable time doing?* This is a useful gauge to be sure you are providing meaningful, equitable volunteer experiences, regardless of ability. Provide skills instruction, adaptations, supports, or accommodations to facilitate the experience if it is needed. Connect volunteers with excellent staff members to be mentored in their roles.
- Maximize relationships between volunteers with and without disabilities. We meet and grow to be friends with people by sharing common activities that we do

over time together. Volunteering and leadership provide a natural venue for friendships to flourish between volunteers of all abilities. Large groups of people with disabilities volunteering together will inhibit relationship development. Include volunteers 'one person at a time.'

- Maximize network building. When we volunteer or take a leadership role, we meet people from differing professions and trades, from different towns, from different backgrounds. We build networks that help us live our lives more effectively. Angela Amado (2001) tells of a person with a developmental disability who volunteered with the local Sertoma Club. When he decided to buy his own home, he drew on his network of fellow Sertoma volunteers – an electrical contractor who helped with his wiring, and an attorney who helped with his deed.
- Highlight the valued social roles that people with disabilities gain being leaders and volunteers. When you feature volunteers in your newsletters or on your website, be sure to include volunteers with disabilities alongside well respected or influential community members who are also volunteers at your agency. You will be helping to change stereotypes and improve the status of people with disabilities in your community.

Volunteering and leadership are leisure pursuits that provide meaning and purpose to our lives, whether we have a disability or not. As professionals in parks and recreation, we can make an important difference in facilitating opportunities for people with disabilities to share these benefits, and be fully included in our communities as valued, equal, and contributing citizens.

DISABILITIES OF FAMOUS PEOPLE LISTED IN ARTICLE

John F. Kennedy	Learning disability	Robert Kennedy	Learning disability
Juliette Gordon Low	Hearing impairment	Abraham Lincoln	Depression
John Lennon	Learning disability	Wilma Mankiller	Muscular dystrophy
David Patterson	Vision impairment	Christopher Reeves	Spinal cord injury
Janet Reno	Parkinson's disease	Franklin Roosevelt	Polio
Helen Keller	Blindness and deafness	Winston Churchill	Bipolar disorder
Napoleon Bonaparte	Epilepsy	Max Cleland	Amputation
Temple Grandin	Autism	Chris Burke	Down syndrome

Reference cited:

Amado, A. N. (2001). "Why Bother? How Persons with Disabilities Benefit as Volunteers." in *Impact: Feature Issue on Volunteerism by Persons with Developmental Disabilities*, 14(2), 4-5. [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration.]

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