

JUDY INTERVIEW #1

Congratulations Alberta, You Rock!

By Judith Wieber

The September issue of SILO'S newsletter would like to highlight Alberta Galdi, a New York Connects - Public Education and Outreach Specialist, spotlighting the work she does and the recent recognition award she received from the New York State Office for the Aging.

New York Connects is a New York State funded program whose regional office is housed here at SILO. It serves as a "one stop" place for free information for all New Yorkers living in Suffolk/Nassau counties wanting to live independently in the community.

I asked Alberta some questions about herself and the work she does as a team member of New York Connects, giving our newsletter readers an opportunity to get to know about Alberta as a person, and the instrumental part she plays in the lives of her participants.

Q: Tell me about yourself.

A: I have been in Human Services since 1977. I am also a professional musician (guitar and bass), performing most of my former music career in various groups and venues, i.e. Westbury Music Fair, Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Apollo, and many other events/gigs in the tri-state area.

I have worn many hats here at SILO/NY Connects. Our Independent Living Center is truly an environment where you are utilized for your skills and gifts. I am called upon at times to oversee special projects, and I have been able to bring my knowledge to offer the "best practices" of information and assistance, public education and outreach to our program. It is our philosophy at NY Connects to ensure people can become empowered and "Independent" within their lives.

Q: How does it feel to receive this award, and what does it mean to you and the work you do?

A: It is total joy! I can only sum it up with these words by Tagore:

"I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy."

Q: Please tell me about some of the successful outreach programs you have organized.

A: Our support groups have been a way to bring community together. Start The Conversation, Women's Empowerment group, OUT@SILO, and the "Sock It To Me" program, providing socks to give out during homeless outreaches.

We presently became an ally organization for the LGBTQ community as a safe space offering services for people with disabilities, as well as anyone who needs SILO's services. We became part of their provider network this year.

Q: How many years have you worked at SILO?

A: Since March of 2017, 8.5 years.

Q: Where are some other places you have worked?

A: I began as a youth worker for the Huntington Youth Bureau in the late 70's, working in the high schools as an outreach person. In 1980, I became coordinator of volunteer services and aided in the implementation of the first shelter for battered women and their children in Suffolk County (Long Island Women's Coalition). I worked for 24 years at Family Residences directing an exceptionally large program in the mental health division of Supported Housing. I also worked at Family Service League, for their Home Base Program, as a second job for 10 years, working with at-risk students who attended late afternoon classes.

Through our "Home Base Beat Band", I would meet students weekly for discussion/mediation for students involved in "gang culture". Music and drumming performances reduced self-harm behavior. We transformed our group by raising expectations, whereby students had to be voted into our exclusive "band", refraining from any violence to oneself or others. The Band performed at local conferences. I am proud to say that some of our students went on to higher education.

Q: What are some of the volunteer positions you have held, present and past?

A: I presently am on the advisory board of KIDS NEED MORE, which is a volunteer organization that provides programs, camp, and support for families with children who have life threatening illnesses.

Q: What is most rewarding and challenging about the work you do?

A: It is never ever boring; we here at NY Connects love a challenge!

Through my approach within the empowerment model "shared power", people experience a compassionate anchor, a sounding board, that can relieve a person who could be very upset and in crisis. Our assistance will hopefully ensure that progress is made for a person's needs. Through the direction of Kelly Rae Douglas, our staff is stellar! NY Connects is very close to our hearts for those of us who have been here since its beginning; it is state of the arts social work in action, especially now in our often-precarious world, where people's needs have increased. We, as staff, support one another, as colleagues and for the people we serve.

Q: What motivated you to go into this field?

A: It's a calling. I have always believed that loving kindness is key when helping someone; it benefits all of us.

Q: What advice would you give your younger self?

A: YOU ARE ENOUGH!

Q: What are some hobbies or interests you have?

A: I am an activist in terms of human rights on every level, I have been part of the LGBTQ movement, Women's and Children's rights.

Q: What do you like to do for fun?

A: I like to study music history, Peruvian shamanism, spending time with musician friends, concerts.

Judy's note: I have known Alberta for the last four years while working at SILO. I have found her to be an easy going and caring person who is extremely easy to talk to. She is always a

listening ear, always accepting, meets everyone where they are at, focuses on a person's strengths and talents, and ready to encourage the best in all.

JUDY INTERVIEW #2

An Interview with Dr. John

By Judith Wieber

This month I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. John Karahalidis, SILO'S consulting psychologist. Dr. John has been on staff at SILO since 2016, and has been helping families with qualification assessments for more than 35 years. He is a psychologist, a counselor, an adjunct professor, an author, and just an all-around good person ready to help people with disabilities, as well as their families.

Q: Please tell me about yourself and the type of work you do for SILO?

A: I provide diagnostic and cognitive testing to assist families with updated testing required for the application process to receive services through OPWDD or when applying for Social Security benefits.

Q: What are the assessments you conduct to help people apply for services?

A: Primarily, adaptive, cognitive (I.Q) and autism spectrum disorder screening and evaluation.

Q: What types of agencies utilize the results of your work?

A: OPWDD (Office for People With Developmental Disabilities), Social Security offices and local school districts who do not provide some of these evaluations.

Q: What are some advantages of a person receiving testing through SILO, as opposed to another service provider?

A: Our fees are significantly lower than other providers. Our turnaround time from start to finish is often a few weeks, not several months elsewhere. In addition, I have nearly 40 years' experience as a psychologist working with consumers with various cognitive, sensory, and physical challenges.

Q: I understand you have been working with SILO for the last ten years, where have you worked before?

A: My vast experiences include a school psychologist at Eastern Suffolk BOCES (Boards of Cooperative Educational Services) for 20 years, a psychologist through the NYS office of OPWDD, a psychologist at Pilgrim Psychiatric Center and a school psychologist at United Cerebral Palsy in Nassau County.

Q: I understand that the process for applying for eligibility for services from the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities is quite different then it was years ago. In what ways has it changed? Is this true for all New York State agencies offering assistance for all people with disabilities?

A. I am aware that the application process is getting more stringent and difficult for parents to navigate. The information they are requesting in some cases may go back many years. Many parents do not have school records for older children or young adults. I suspect but can't verify that that this might be the case with other state agencies.

Q: Please tell me about the work you do at St. Joseph's and other colleges.

A: I am an adjunct professor of Psychology and Education at St. Joseph's University. Many of my students are future teachers. I try to instill the reward of considering the field of Special Education as they explore the various fields to pursue as teachers. I am also an adjunct professor of Psychology at NYIT in Westbury and SCCC in Selden. I thoroughly enjoy teaching and sharing my extensive experiences with my students.

Q: What are the objectives, or goals you set forth for your students.

A: To question. Meaning avoiding the easy avenue of going online or websites that are not objective. If you want an answer to a question, do the research. Don't rely on what others have posted. And don't be afraid to ask questions. Many of my students are reluctant to raise their hands to ask a question of their professor. I was one of those students. I guarantee the question you have is probably shared by other students as well but often students fear they are the only one unsure.

Q: I hear you are also an author, would you like to share what the book is about?

A: I actually published my book in 2020. The title is *"The Patient Who Thought He Was Dead: and Other Psychological Stories"*. It is a recollection of the many interesting and poignant experiences I have encountered in the various facilities and agencies I have had over the last 35 years. It is available on Amazon in hardcover or paperback.

Q: Have you always lived on LI? Where did you go to school?

A: I was a product of the NYC public school system. I grew up in Queens, NY, and attended local public schools. I attended St. John's University where I received my BA in Psychology, MS in School Psychology, PhD in Professional Child Psychology and my EdD in Educational Leadership and Supervision. I am a certified school psychologist, a licensed mental health counselor, formally a psychologist through the NYS Office of Mental Health, and a psychologist through the Office of People with Developmental Disabilities.

Q: What led you to this line of work?

A: I was always interested in psychology, but didn't know what avenue it would take. I recall, as a child, my grandfather having Alzheimer's disease, and feeling helpless in watching him deteriorate. I had friends growing up who had physical and sensory issues, and saw how they were treated differently at school and from people who did not understand their challenges. My goal was to try to enlighten others and to make a difference in the lives of people who may need support.

Q: Who are your mentors, who inspired you?

A: I didn't major in psychology until my 3rd year of college. I found that I was inspired by my psychology professors more than any other classes. Each class brought a different kind of

fascination. I wanted to learn more of the field and use my acquired knowledge to help others in the future.

Side note from the doctor: For me, a psychologist and a car mechanic have a lot in common. When your car is not operating right, it is the car mechanic's job to evaluate the problem using their diagnostic tools, explain to the owner what needs to be done, hopefully correct the problem, and do so in a reasonable amount of time and cost.

I see myself as a car mechanic of individuals. When faced with an issue, either by the person, a school, hospital, agency, or a family member, my role is the same. To identify the problem, use my diagnostic tools (psychological tests), explain what needs to be done, and, again, hopefully in a reasonable amount of time and cost. Can that car repair need correction? Can the same issue return in the future? The same applies to psychological intervention.

ANGEL VASQUEZ ARTICLE #1

Social Cues: What Remains Unspoken

By Angel Vasquez

As long as the weather stays warm, celebrations and get-togethers will be in full swing. It is one of those seasons when people either catch up with one another or meet new friends and acquaintances. However, for people on the autism spectrum, there is one aspect that remains unspoken: social cues. Social cues are an integral part of these interactions, especially when what is unsaid is just as important as what is said. Mastering this life skill will determine the difference between presenting the right idea and giving the wrong idea. For people on the Autism spectrum, this is extremely difficult. Most people on the spectrum have trouble detecting the subtleties of the hidden aspects of human interaction. Some are even unable to read facial expressions. Recognizing certain emotions is a crucial aspect of social cues.

As someone on the Autism spectrum, this is something I can appreciate. There have been times in my life where I have struggled to pick up on social cues. This has caused me to have certain problems regarding my social interactions. Some main social cues that autistic people tend to miss are when a person is bored, upset because they are standing too close to them when they're speaking to them, not knowing when to change the subject, and being unable to pick up on sarcasm or comedy or when that person makes a direct request. There are many negative consequences that can result from this, including the loss of social connections and employment opportunities, being shunned by others, and direct confrontations with people. These can result in autistic people not wanting to interact with society in general. Such an experience may cause

an autistic person to feel alienated and alone. It might even result in suicide without the right guidance.

This is why a better understanding of what Autism is serves as a vital element to socialization. It is simply a basic human need. For example, I registered to be part of a walking group that used to take place at Patriot's Preserve. It was being organized by my local library. All of them were old white fogeys. Because of this, I had no desire to speak to them. So, I began walking ahead of the group, only stopping so I could let them catch up to me. When I attended the walking activity again, I noticed two newcomers. Both of them were women, one younger and one older. The older woman began talking to our group leader regarding her progress as a walker. After she finished talking to him, I tried showing her a fitness app called Strava. Suddenly, she became standoffish by saying: "I'm a hospital nurse and I have too many apps on my phone, but thank you." It was so abrupt.

For me, this was an opportunity to be friendly with another person. When she reacted so curtly, I felt no desire to speak to her any further. In fact, I felt hurt because usually when I am friendly with others, they reciprocate towards me as well. Usually, it is well received. This was not the case this time around. I consulted my academic coach about what I had done wrong to have this happen. He shared that perhaps she did not take so kindly to having received unsolicited fitness advice from a stranger, and a strange man at that. Of course, we may not know for sure, but this seems to be accurate. I took the point, though, that before I approach strangers I need to try and be aware of these types of social cues and graces, so as not to unwittingly offend someone.

My coach explained it was not that I did something wrong, but perhaps I unknowingly tapped into an insecurity of hers. What I took from this lesson is that I needed to become more aware of these types of social graces to be more mindful for the next time I meet new people of what to suggest and not suggest when first meeting someone. In other words, it is not a bad thing to take a new relationship slowly, to then learn about a person's desires and also some of their unique insecurities as well. By unwittingly tapping into an insecurity right away, they may be permanently turned off to speaking with you, instead of giving you the benefit of the doubt.

Nowadays, I have learned to reflect on these experiences and improve my social protocols. It's important to remember that everyone, neurotypical or neurodivergent, makes social mistakes. The key is to practice self-compassion and view these instances as learning opportunities rather than failures. Reflecting on interactions, perhaps by journaling or discussing them with a trusted

coach or therapist, can help identify patterns and develop improved strategies for future engagements. Having this guidance is critical. For those without access to a coach or therapist, seeking the time of a trusted friend, parent, or sibling can also work to review and reflect on social situations that perhaps did not go so well. I believe that by implementing these strategies, individuals on the autism spectrum can gradually improve their ability to navigate social complexities, leading to more fulfilling connections and ideally, hopefully, a greater sense of belonging.

ANGEL VASQUEZ ARTICLE #2

Adaptability

By Angel Vasquez

How can an individual truly become stronger? In life, there are many doors a person may pass through. Some doors have opportunities, while others do not. I have had to wrestle with this personally. For those with Autism, such a question serves a major purpose. It addresses the existence of a mental tug of war between structure and change. To overcome this ordeal, autistic individuals must learn to harness adaptability. Adaptability is essential in navigating through life. Obtaining a skill such as this has proven to be challenging for people with autism. Change has the tendency to create confusion, doubt, and trauma without the proper guidance. Often, change can be debilitating. Change can be seen everywhere, and it usually occurs when we least expect it.

One critical aspect of an autistic person's life is access to invaluable resources. In my case, the process of obtaining social services can be challenging. Rarely has it been as smooth as advertised. I have had to put a certain degree of trust in the process. There was a time where I was required to wait 2 to 3 years before my mother could find someone to be my Self Direction traveling staff. In order to cope with this, all I could really do is ask her to keep me updated. I learned that being my own advocate was the best and only thing I was able to do at that time. It requires one to be extremely assertive and a little pushy to get the services we need. Otherwise, I will never get any form of assistance.

As of now, I am currently working towards obtaining my SSI benefits. This has not been an easy endeavor by any stretch of the imagination. I have been working closely with my mother on this since she needs to be kept in the loop regarding finances. I am also working towards my driver's license, studying for the driver's exam with my academic coach. I am again working with my Self

Direction to help with obtaining access to a driver's school, and with Ruth, my Self-Direction Community Staff. The driving school is still trying to connect with my broker, and I am currently navigating this process and advocating for myself by trying to push to get the bureaucracy moving.

In a sense, the only way to get the ball moving is to advocate and push the issue when possible. I have learned that accepting help from others and being patient are critical, and something that I would advise all people with autism and other disabilities to do as well. While I want to be an independent adult, accepting help is also a part of this, which is what I have come to recognize. This has not always been easy for me, because I want to be independent and am very independent minded. I have had to reframe my mindset by admitting to myself that there are certain aspects of the process that are out of my control. My mom, academic coach, and the support staff at SILO helped me realize this. Having an effective support system is crucial if you ask them for assistance. They can only help if you allow them to. Simply continuing to obsess over this would have only made me more upset. I have learned that I need to seek guidance from trusted individuals in order to get past this. This has been a pivotal step in helping me become more resilient to the inevitable roadblocks that arise so I can continue to adapt.

When thoughtfully integrated, technology can help transform a challenge into an opportunity. It also plays an increasingly important role in empowering autistic individuals like me to navigate a world that often feels unpredictable. It serves as a powerful tool for fostering adaptability, providing essential resources, and, especially for me, support systems. I utilize Discord and video chatting software to meet with my academic coach. I also have learned to set up a list of reminders on my to-do list on my phone to actively remind me so that I can keep track of all my tasks. My phone has also served as the main means to contact my support staff, enabling seamless and consistent guidance, even when in-person meetings are not possible. As an autistic individual, technology has also offered an alternative way to connect with others, build relationships, and participate in communities. I also am using online courses to get certifications in areas such as search engine optimization, AI, and digital media marketing to enhance my resume.

If there is one lesson to be learned from my experience, it is that autistic people should be more concerned about their ability, or should I say willingness, to adapt to change, rather than change itself. Of course, this is easier said than done. One must advocate for oneself, seek support, and

reframe their minds when the going gets tough. Ultimately, only by learning from difficult situations can an autistic person thrive as a member of society.