

CONNECTIONS

A newsletter for fathers and families of children with special needs.

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Welcome — Bienvenido

Each October WSN holds a conference only for dads. This in itself is not so unusual. However, when you think about dads getting together, all of whom have children with special health care needs/developmental disabilities, it is distinctly different. As you will see throughout the collection of stories regarding the conference, dads find these events very satisfying and even life changing.

Dr. Robert Naseef, a devoted father and very insightful professional, was the keynote speaker at this year's conference, adding deep personal and professional perspectives for dads to consider. In the process he made some very helpful observations he is allowing us to share.

Mark Gabarra, a committed and caring father and WSN leader, provides additional views of the conference and summarizes what dads felt during this unique day.

Washington State Representative Andy Hill, the recipient of the Big Time Daddy Award from WSN has a few words to say about what this means for him. Representative Hill is a very influential and important supporter of citizens with different abilities.

John Weisenfeld, another great dad & WSN leader provides the pictures for this edition, and also authored a very personal story published by CNN-The Unexpected Lives We're Living section. A courageous look at one dad and family working to make the most of their many challenges. The tenacity, perseverance, and patience required is inspiring!

WSN also participates in educational events like the King Co. Legislative Forum. Thanks to King Co. & Arc of King Co. Family Coalition for sponsoring this great event!

The start of our 36th year celebrating dads, & connecting with fathers and families is a great time to pause and be appreciative! We are particularly thankful for the support

What is WSN?

The mission of Washington State Fathers Network (WSFN) is to promote fathers as crucially important people in their children and families' lives. We firmly believe men are superb resources for each other and fathers have special needs of their own when it comes to raising a child with chronic illness or developmental disability.

WSFN, a program of Kindering, is funded by the Office of Children with Special Health Care Needs Program, Washington State Department of Health, grants, and private donations.



Washington State Fathers Network

Robert Naseef, Ph.D., Keynote Speaker at the WSFN State Conference, wrote this article for FamilyAffaires.com. We appreciate his permission to reprint it here.

Fathers of Children with Special Needs

There was more than enough suffering to go around. For the most part, the shock and awe of the original diagnosis had worn off as 49 fathers of special needs children shared their stories at the annual conference of the Washington State Fathers Network in Seattle on October 11.

Most men embrace the role of problem solvers and want to solve the problems of the child's special needs. But it is not that simple. The disability is a gritty and unwelcome reality that brings up feelings that are hard to talk about.

For most men, it's ok to be angry but the sadness and the worry of the day-to-day life just sticks in our throats. As the men on the opening panel discussion struggled to give voice to their experiences, it seemed that everyone's heart opened as they listened.

The typical difficulty voicing feelings is often the root of male depression and a huge problem in relationships. The diagnosis was not wanted or expected; nonetheless, these guys had fallen in love with their children all over again. Despite and even because of the trauma of the diagnosis, accepting a child drastically different from the one expected often makes incredible growth possible.

Learning to speak and listen from the heart can bring us so much closer to our families. Sharing our experiences-whether they are the heartbreaking frustrations or the little breakthroughs and celebrations-is the best medicine for the isolation which is so profound at the beginning of this journey. During an open mic session, one man shared that his 18 year old son with autism had just failed his driver's test. He is determined to pass next time. Learning to drive was a small inconceivable miracle when his son was in early intervention.

The father of a medically fragile daughter with cerebral palsy who is not able to speak shared his anger about the birth injury. In his next breath, he bragged about how his daughter is 100 pages ahead of the rest of her mainstream class in math.

Another man's feeling emerged in telling the story of how his son with Down syndrome too over the top bunk when his older brother went away to college. The conversation asking permission between his sons confirmed their brotherhood and touched everyone listening.

Everyday, children with special needs teach parents profound lessons. That growth from the original trauma forges a loving identity we can be proud of.



The Dads Panel-A Favorite!



Dr. Naseef preps for keynote.



Lunch & a chance to talk.

Mark Gabarra, co-facilitator of Kindering Bellevue & Bothell groups, and also WSN's tech expert, summarized the conference, and posted it to the WSN blog/website. The following is what he had to say:

A Great Time Was Had By All!!!

Yet another annual conference [the 20th] is behind us and a great time was had by all again this year. Some of us are still recovering from an especially powerful conference. I found this year's sessions and guys to be exceptionally more introspective. While past conferences were amazing as well, they have often had a more external focus with topics such as emergency preparedness, educational placements and IEPs; guardianship, trusts, and wills; etc. Others have been celebrations of fatherhood, exploring ways dads bring our unique "male-ness" to the table in way that help our children and families. While this year's conference had breakout sessions along these topics (they are always popular and were so this year too), our keynote, delivered by Dr. Robert Naseef, and at least two of our breakout sessions focused on fathers looking inward to better understand what was going on inside ourselves and how that could impact our children and families both positively and negatively. It was a great day!

The following are quotes from dads in attendance at the conference:

This was my first time at a WSN event. I cannot express how much it means to me. It was very insightful and helpful.

The Dads Panel and Open Mic-it is great to simply listen to other dads.

I didn't come with any expectations. However it exceeded anything I could have imagined.

Great facilitation, management, and content. I feel renewed!

I've walked away with new ideas and resources.

I recommit to being a better dad to my sons and a better husband to my wife.

The sense of community and camaraderie was amazng. I felt a wonderful sense of support and understanding.

Superb in all ways. Great panel and workshops.

Big Time Daddy Award

Senator Andy Hill received the Big Time Daddy Award from the Washington State Fathers Network in recognition of his legislative work which supports fathers of children with special needs and their families across the State of Washington. Specifically, Senator Hill introduced the VIP Act (SB 6387) this year to provide needed services to individuals with developmental disabilities. The legislation became law this past July. The VIP Act provides respite care for up to 4,000 families who have been on a waitlist, some for years. 1,000 individuals with developmental disabilities will receive employment or employment support also as a result of the legislation.

“Not only is this one of the best-named awards I have received but it is one of the most personally rewarding,” said Hill. “I can’t express how powerful it was when one of the fathers came up to me, showed me a picture of his son and said ‘because of you, my son will receive services this year.’”

“Receiving this award has been truly humbling, and one of the big reasons why I am working so hard to return to the Senate next year. This makes all of the hard work and time away from my own family worth it.”



Mark G. presenting the award to Senator Hill



Two outstanding advocates & Senator Hill

A Note About The Big Time Daddy Award

This very special honor, unique to Fathers Network, originated many years ago after a panel presentation by dads when an African American gentleman walked up and said, “You men are Big Time Daddies.” Asking him what he meant by that, he said, “You stay around when other men leave; you love your child big-time. Nowhere do I hear any whining or lack of fairness. You just do the job.

This coveted recognition is given to men-and women-making special contributions to WSNF & the community, and representing the spirit of Big Time Daddies everywhere.

Laughter Can’t Relieve This Stress

By John Weisenfeld

John is a WSNF leader and very perceptive father of a daughter with Angelman’s syndrome. Recently he wrote a piece for CNN-*The Unexpected Lives We’re Living-Raising Children with Special Needs*. His wonderful story can be read at: <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2014/12/ireport/unexpected-lives/>

King Co. & Arc of King Co. Family Coalition Legislative Forum

WSNF is very supportive of important partners doing outstanding work for individuals with different abilities and their families. That is why we were delighted to contribute to the Forum this year. With nearly 500 citizens and 25-30 legislators it was another consequential event. It was also a great opportunity to talk directly to legislators and understand their positions on issues important to children and families.



The Legislative Forum-2014, photo compliments of Representative Tana Senn

Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs, *PULSE* newsletter, November/December 2014, Highlights WSN

Fathers Network was asked to contribute an article for the AMCHP newsletter regarding recent research about us and also our 2014 conference. We were pleased to add these perspectives about fathers and know that parents and professionals across the U.S. would be finding out more regarding WSN.

The article is available at:

www.amchp.org/AboutAMCHP/Newsletter/Pulse/NovemberDecember2014

Did you know? Each day in America...

- 865 babies are born at low birth weight
- 159 babies are born who will be diagnosed with autism
- Every 4 ½ minutes a baby is born with a birth defect
- 1,392 babies are born into extreme poverty
- 1,241 babies are born without health insurance
- 1 in 3 babies born will develop diabetes sometime in their lifetime

(Data from Family Voices, 2014)

The above challenges have serious implications for the individuals experiencing them, their parents, and the larger community. The one thing WSN knows is that when dads are caring and involved, nearly all, if not all, can be mitigated. Moms are critical, and fathers too. When getting support, working together, and connecting with the broader community, these kinds of issues have the potential to enhance our lives. Thank you to all families for caring for your children, lending a helping hand, and making the world a better place for all of us! Happy New Year!

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Three handsome young men at the summer BBQ!