

*The information below was presented by long time Network member Paul Blair at the 2022 Fathers Network Gathering as part of a tribute to James May, our first director. In it, Paul describes not only his journey as a member of the Network but also some valuable and interesting insight into the early days of the program.*

On a Saturday morning, in late fall of 1986, my wife kicked me out of our house. She didn't ask, she demanded that I go to a meeting at Merrywood School to discuss our daughter, Sarah. Sarah was born with Hypomelanosis of Ito, a rare developmental disability that impacted her in many ways - especially cognitively. Sarah was attending PT and OT sessions at Merrywood School (later renamed Kinderling Center) in Bellevue and my wife had heard about this meeting for men to discuss their kids with special needs. I did not want to go! Sitting around and sharing feelings with other men. No way!! However, my wife Mary, said she was tired of dealing with my depression, my anger, my frustration, my feeling of helplessness, my confusion, my hopelessness, and my sadness about our daughter's condition. And she told me I was going! I reluctantly went to the meeting.

I don't remember much about the beginning of that meeting except it was facilitated by two men: Paul Egly and James May. Paul had a daughter with special needs and James' background was in education and as a licensed mental health counselor. James seemed to be the main guy in charge, and looking at him, beard in all, kind of reminded me of taking Sigmund Freud, Jerry Garcia from the Grateful Dead, and Moses and shoving them all together into one person.

I know I didn't say very much at that meeting, but I did listen to what the other guys were saying. Every man there spoke of the love they had for their child with special needs. That was exactly how I felt. That part, I definitely remembered from the meeting. But the men also talked about their anger, frustration, hopelessness, depression, confusion, and not knowing how to help their child with special needs. Sirens were going off in my head! Wait a minute, these are the same issues I'm dealing with, no way this can be coincidental! I felt like I was set-up by my wife and this guy, James May! Collusion had taken place!

After the meeting was over I went up to James and with an accusatory voice asked him, "Did my wife call you and tell you what to talk about at this meeting?" He looked at me with a puzzled look on his face and simply said, "No, what do you mean?" Even though I didn't share my thoughts during the meeting, I told James that what the other fellows talked about were many of the things I was also dealing with. He smiled. We chatted a bit more and he assured me that my wife did not call him and he invited me back to attend the next meeting.

Little did I know that my first encounter with James May would be the beginning of a dear friendship that would last us close to 35 years. Our personal relationship would also include co-facilitating the Bellevue Fathers Network Group as well as working closely together in the formation of the Washington State Fathers Network. More about that later.

And with that, I am deeply honored to pay a tribute to this amazing man, James May. Louis asked if I would talk a bit about James, my experience working with him, and a brief history of the Washington State Fathers Network.

James May. Some of you know James, others of you are only familiar with him by something you might have read or maybe, just by the pictures that have been displayed today. I cannot adequately and

eloquently enough express to you how much James has positively impacted my life and the lives of so many men and their families.

James and I frequently had our “meetings or catch-up time,” as we called it, over lunch or dinner at some little restaurant in Bellevue or that small diner on Queen Anne, not too far from his Seattle home. I personally know that he loved talking and sharing with men about all aspects of raising a child with special needs - the good, and sometimes, the not so good.

To better understand James, let me read to you something he wrote in 2005:

I was hired in the fall of 1986. I didn't have any formal training in disabilities except for my growing up with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, diagnosed when I was fourteen. When a person later remarked that I was “a special needs kid,” I was startled. That term was simply never used when I was young. I knew how isolated my own father had been and the negative impact that had on our family. In my heart and soul, I knew that men needed places to share their joys and challenges.

James often talked to me, that when he was growing up, about how his stoic, German dad, often dealt with James' progressing arthritis by simply working, working, and working and how his dad's absence impacted his family. James knew the importance of men talking to other men about their joys and struggles of raising a child with a developmental disability, and sharing those experiences with each other, rather than bottling it all up inside and trying to escape through things like work, and abusing alcohol or drugs.

Speaking of Sigmund Freud again. I found a quote from him that I thought was so appropriate for this tribute, and I think James would have enjoyed hearing. Freud said, “Only a good-for-nothing is not interested in his past.” I like that. So, here we go. Let me put you in the time machine and give you a CliffsNotes version of the history of the Washington State Fathers Network. By doing so, I think you'll not only hear about the roots of this program, OUR program, but the contributions and leadership that James provided and why today, we are giving him this tribute. Please forgive me if I leave out some names, facts, details or if I have something a bit turned around. This is what I've researched, remembered or experienced.

It all began at the University of Washington. In 1978, Don Meyer and Greg Schell co-facilitated meetings where men who had kids in the preschool and kindergarten programs at the U-Dub's Experimental Education Unit (called the EEU) were invited to spend a few hours, twice a month, to bring their kids with special needs to meet other kids and dads. At the first meeting they had four dads and four kids. This was OUR beginning.

Eventually, due to lack of funding, the program was looking to be cut from U-Dub. One of the dads who regularly attended the Saturday meetings, Paul Egly, approached Mimi Siegel, who at the time was the Executive Director at Merrywood School in Bellevue, about hosting the program. Remember, Merrywood School is now known as Kinderling Center. Mimi agreed and the program was moved to Bellevue in 1985 with Greg Schell and Paul Egly co-facilitating. Their first order of business was hiring someone to direct the program, full-time.

As Paul Egly later wrote in an article for one of our Fathers Network newsletters, “During the selection process, Mimi and I ran across James May. James had zero experience with the special needs population, but [Mimi and I] sensed that James was the man for the job.”

James was hired in October of 1986.

The Father’s Program, as it was called, originally had a national Department of Education grant that called for James to replicate the Father’s Program at Merrywood School to 12 other sites around the United States. So, in addition to running the Father’s Program at Merrywood, during 1986 and 1987 James created those other 12 programs. In 1988, the “Fathers Program” was renamed the “National Fathers Network” and for the next 12 years, **PLEASE LISTEN CAREFULLY**, for the next 12 years, James helped develop more than 100 fathers programs in 36 states, Canadian provinces, and even in New Zealand. Side-note: James told me those New Zealand men really like their beer. Since then, many other father’s groups have branched off from those original 100+ programs that James had helped create. Wow!! Think about that! Over 100 Fathers Programs. When federal funding ceased in 1998, James had recorded more than one million miles in airplane travel. The Million Mile Man!

And think of this: of all the father’s programs, the one at Kinderling Center in Bellevue, is the longest running fathers program of its type, in the world. It is The Mothership of all the programs!

During the time he was traveling across the United States developing those 100+ programs, James also received funding to work with dads whose children had HIV and AIDS. James wore many hats, helped create and develop many programs, and served a variety of communities. I know he was very proud of that.

So, you might be asking, “Okay - how does this all specifically lead to the formation of the Washington State Fathers Network?” That, in itself, is a very cool story. You could say it was by accident, but I’d like to say, “It was meant to be.” I don’t believe in coincidences. I believe everything happens for a purpose or a reason. So, here’s what happened and how the WSN was started.

In 1993, while attending a national conference in Williamsburg, Virginia, of all the people attending this conference, James just happened to sit down next to a woman named Kathy Chapman. They introduced themselves and Kathy said she knew about the work James had been doing with fathers and was quite impressed. ALSO, Kathy just so happened to be the director for the Washington State Department of Health, Children with Special Health Care Needs Division in Olympia, Washington. So here we are: Kathy and James, 3,000 miles from home and this meeting between them takes place. Coincidence? I don’t think so. Kathy offered James “seed money” if the work James had been doing across the country and at Merrywood School would be focused more on dads in the state of Washington. James readily accepted her offer and, in 1994, the Washington State Fathers Network was created. And as they say, the rest is history!

Since that eventful meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia, the WSN has gone through a number of transitions and changes. At the time James retired in 2005, there were 17 fathers’ programs statewide, serving more than 2,000 fathers, family members, and providers from diverse backgrounds. More than 2 million dollars in grants had been awarded to the Fathers Network. And, our website averaged 2.5 million hits per year, from people all over the world. Numerous individuals, families, organizations, and corporations have helped us along with their love, support, and, in some cases, their contributions too.

We held our first Washington State Fathers Network Conference in 1995 at the Highland Center in Bellevue. 46 men attended. With the energy level, it seemed like 146!

So, here we are, 44 years after it all began with four dads and their four kids at the University of Washington and 28 years since the Washington State Fathers Network was conceived. Where will it go from here?

When he retired, James wrote:

Thank you to EVERYONE for making this Network a reality. We did it together! I look forward to the next 20 years of [hearing the] wonderful stories of courage and full male involvement. The men in this program pushed through their lost dreams and found new ones. They are forever changed and have become better fathers because of their children! Thank you for being my role models and sharing your lives with me.

Even though James is no longer with us, we want to thank him. We want to thank him for all the love and encouragement he's given us fathers, as well as our kids and families! We love you, James!

Thanks for listening to OUR story. And it is OUR story.