**ABILITY Build, the signature program of ABILITY Awareness, engages volunteers with health conditions and disabilities in building accessible low-income homes. Like its founder, Chet Cooper, ABILITY Build is an iconoclast, exploding traditional expectations, having a blast while doing the “impossible.” LINCS first connected with ABILITY Awareness when they organized a house build in O’ahu Hawaii, site of a LINCS network.**

Want tips for challenging stale notions about disability? Read our interview with ABILITY Awareness founder and Executive Director, Chet Cooper.

---

**How do you choose where to do a build?**

It’s a push pull phenomena, most of the time we are pulled. Most recently, for instance, a public official called us to ask if we would do an ABILITY Build in his district. Most of the time, Habitat for Humanity affiliates hear about us and ask us to get involved. Sometimes we push. For instance, if we partner with a corporate sponsor, we might locate a site near their corporate headquarters or one of their plants.

---

**How do you recruit volunteers with disabilities for your builds?**

We use a blow horn. :-) Actually, we go into the community and start with organizations we already know or have worked with, like Independent Living Centers. Then we spread out from there. It also depends on the project. If the project is looking for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, then we go to a place like Gallaudet University. We work with national organizations that have local affiliates like the National Federation for the Blind or the Department of Rehabilitation. We also send out press releases. People read about us and show up.

---

**I get the sense that you think of the ABILITY Build project as a lever for change? As a way to impact the disability inclusion field as a whole?**

That’s right. We like the area of home construction because it seems extreme. We wanted to demonstrate something that, for many people, doesn’t normally, intuitively make sense. When they think of the word disability, they think it means that you don’t work, you can’t work. It doesn’t mean you build a house. People in the construction industry might be familiar with disability because they had a friend or colleague who acquired a disability because of the work. Then we go to them and tell them we want to bring people with disabilities on to construction sites. They certainly weren’t thinking that way before. It can take a lot of training to change someone’s perspective, but we’ve seen light bulbs go on.

ABILITY Builds also provide psychosocial rehabilitation, which means a program that brings both mental and social benefits. For example, I was at a build one day and the man next to me told me he had schizophrenia. He said, in order to cope, he learned to take one positive element in his day and carry that positive element into his next day—to fight off thoughts of suicide. When I met him, he was on the last day of a 7-day Blitz Build—we built a home for a Vietnam vet who used a wheelchair. He said from those seven days, he had at least two years of memories to go on.
Having worked with you in the past, I know your philosophy is “bring anybody on a build and we’ll figure out how to make it work.” Obviously this requires some creativity. What kind of process do you go through to make it work?

We train the volunteer coordinators on the builds. We start with the lessons we’ve learned from past builds. It’s dynamic. We’re always adding new lessons, different things that have occurred on work sites. Most of the time it’s simple tweaks. In our case, necessity is the mother of all invention. On the last build, the soon-to-be homeowner was blind. He was mixing cement with a hoe, and the hoe kept turning on him, so he wasn’t getting it fully mixed. So, we said, what if we put a tie on top of the handle, something that protrudes from the top? When we did that, he could feel through his gloves where the top of the hoe was. So, in essence, we altered the tool in such a way so you know where the top is. On another build we had a volunteer who used a wheelchair who was trying to cut wood using a blade saw. Usually you put the wood in a sawhorse, but the standard sawhorse was too high. So we cut down the legs on the sawhorse, so he could reach. If a worksite is muddy, you can create a pass for a wheelchair, by laying sheets of plywood on the ground. Most of the tweaks we make are common sense.

When you meet skepticism by a site manager, disability agency, or by person with a disability themselves, how do you handle that?

We get skepticism from both camps. In construction, you’ll always get the types who don’t get it to begin with, because we come from a world where disability means you can’t work. A lot of people need to experience something to understand it. Just talking to them about it won’t change their minds. This was one of the reasons why I started ABILITY Magazine. I wanted people to see different images of what it means to have a disability, have a new experience with those images, which will hopefully change their attitudes. Even when we do outreach to disability organizations to find volunteers, often the first thing the representative says is: “Are you sure you want our people to come out to volunteer? Our people have disabilities,” which means they don’t fully understand what we’re doing and they have put limitations on their clients. Once they get on a build and start volunteering it’s fine.

You work largely with Habitat for Humanity, transforming their traditional builds into inclusive builds. What’s your collaboration like?

We collaborate with their volunteer coordinators. We try to do a 50/50 split. 50% of the volunteers are recruited by us and 50% by the Habitat volunteer coordinator. Our first build was almost all volunteers with disabilities. The proportion shifts back and forth depending on the build. Basically, we work hand in hand with their volunteer coordinator.

Were you the one to approach Habitat for Humanity with this idea?

Yes. I interviewed Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, in our magazine. I knew he put accessible features in homes, but he was getting in trouble with a group called Concrete Change, because he didn’t have a visitability component as part of the homes. Visitability is the idea that even if the homeowner doesn’t have a disability, each home should be accessible to someone with a lack of mobility, who might want to visit. This means that each house needs at least one zero-step entrance and a bathroom on the first floor that’s accessible. When I interviewed Millard, he was in support of the visitability concept, but felt he couldn’t make any more demands on his affiliates. I said we could help him. We discussed the idea of volunteers with disabilities building homes and promoting visitability along the way. He said: “Do you think it could work?” and I said: “Yes, it can.” He chose Birmingham to be the site of the first build. It was a great choice because Birmingham has a large affiliate. Other smaller affiliates might take months to complete a build. Faster, blitz builds create more exposure. That’s what we needed in Birmingham.
Inclusion for you is multifaceted, isn’t it? You include volunteers with disabilities on the builds and build accessible houses, right?

We ask the affiliates we work with to covenant with us, to promise us that they will have visitability. Some of them immediately embrace it; some have to be persuaded. Georgia already passed legislation that all new home construction needs to have visitability. England passed a similar law eight years ago. Eventually it’s going to be national legislation. We tell affiliates: “Why not be ahead of the curve, why wait for legislation? Do it because it’s the right thing to do.” It just makes sense, especially as people are living longer, and acquiring age-related impairments. It’s very expensive to retrofit a home.

So many people think disability is some other entity that doesn’t affect them. The truth is that anybody can acquire a disability at any time, which could mean mobility issues. Second, disability is often part of the aging process. The average person has 13 years of disability in their own lifetime; it could be hearing loss, heart disease, arthritis. Disability is part of the fabric of life.

We’re talking about multiple layers of inclusion. Sometimes I think the whole point of disability inclusion work is to help people see the world with different eyes. How do you think exposure to disability inclusion principles has affected the Habitat for Humanity chapters you work with? The way they see homes? Or the way they see potential volunteers?

We’ve done mapping, taken satellite pictures of our builds, and there’s a rainbow over each community we’ve worked in. :-) Seriously, there is a shift over time, gradually the pendulum shifts a bit. You might have to go back for a booster shot. The Baltimore affiliate had a big change; their construction supervisor really had a paradigm shift. He said he’d never see people with disabilities the same way again. Even his language changed. He decided to never use the word disability again; instead he used the term differently-abled. He became Executive Director of that affiliate, so I know they will be inclusive.

You have a great video which demolishes (using a construction metaphor!) limiting ideas about who can work on a construction site. Tell us about some of the stories that we see.

A volunteer, who happened to be blind, said that she originally thought she was coming on as a token person with a disability. A lot of people might think that way. But by the time she was done at the site she had calluses on her hands. She said it was exciting because her husband had worked in construction and all the years she was married, she was never allowed on a worksite, never picked up a hammer, and here she was building a house. Another volunteer who was blind was working on an interior of the house, and I overheard her taking multiple cell phone calls; she kept saying: “No, no I’m on the worksite. No, no, I’m building the house.” She was telling all her friends.

I just read a report conducted by the Office of Disability Employment Policy; it said that goods-producing industries, like construction, employed less people with disabilities than service industries and the public sector. Goods-producing companies reported that they didn’t hire people with disabilities because of the nature of the work itself—they assumed it was too physical taxing. What do you think of this? Do you know if any of your volunteers have gone on to do other builds or get employed in construction?

On one build site, a guy came out who was an electrician prior to an accident in which he lost his family and became paraplegic. He heard about us in press coverage and was planning to come out—not to volunteer, but to watch. When we saw him, we told him no one watches, everyone volunteers. So, we drafted him. He came back the next day with his toolkit.
That happened to be the day the electricians were on site and he got hired as a result. After his accident, he never thought he would be employed as an electrician again. Because he had acquired his disability, he had the same mindset as others. This experience changed his view of his supposed limitations.

**Having known you for a bit, I know you’re entrepreneurial. How do you see the ABILITY Build program evolving and growing?**

We’ve seen the power that a high profile volunteerism event, like ABILITY Builds, can have in changing attitudes and perceptions and we want to carry this over to more communities. Currently, we’re in the process of creating an ABILITY Corps which will be comprised of people with and without disabilities working together in national service. The ABILITY Build program, and our partnership with Habitat for Humanity, will always be a very visible opportunity for ABILITY Corps members, but there will be a lot of other volunteer opportunities as well.

And we are currently working in two areas of TV. The first is web TV, providing a specific TV channel for programs relating the health, disability and human potential. And a broadcast television show called ABILITY on Assignment. We’re still pitching AOA so Karen if you know someone in the industry—let’s do lunch.

To find out more about ABILITY Awareness visit their website at http://www.abilityawareness.org or contact (714) 277-4330.

*The Local Inclusion Network Collaboratives for Service (LINCS) at UCLA Tarjan Center Service Inclusion Project is part of a national initiative in California, Hawaii and Florida, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. LINCS uses community collaborations to increase the number of people with disabilities taking their places as volunteers in community service. For more information on the California LINCS project or to share your own success story, call 310-825-0067 or send an email to kleventhal@mednet.ucla.edu.*