



INTRODUCTION

The sudden sound was ear piercing, and in combination with the brightly flashing strobe lights, I found it momentarily unnerving. My tour guide and I had been heading into the Project PRIDE room, where the most profoundly disabled clients were tended, when the fire alert system suddenly went off. I immediately asked if it was a drill, and Cary Harned, my guide, assured me it was not. It was a real fire warning.

My first thought was of the hundreds of adults with intellectual disabilities at work, play or rest in the large facility. My tour had already taken us through the immaculate food service training area, where a number of clients were learning new culinary skills. And we had gone through the large, seemingly chaotic packaging and assembly warehouse. Here, sixty or more men and women were diligently labeling, folding and packaging emerald green print pajamas as part of a current work contract. How could they possibly get out in a quick and orderly fashion between the long lines of work space tables, I wondered.

I was a complete novice at this time. It was my first tour of Opportunity Village, and I admit I badly miscalculated the level of competency of these men and women who were intellectually disabled, and their dedicated staff. Cary and I opened a large set of double doors leading to the warehouse — no more than fifteen seconds had elapsed since the alarm was tripped — and already a stream of orderly, well-organized people was heading our way. There was little talking, and absolutely none of the horseplay I recalled occurring during my school fire drills years earlier. Those with physical disabilities, struggling with walkers, canes or wheelchairs, were being lovingly helped along by other clients, their friends and work mates. Many held their hands over their ears; Cary told me the screeching sound and the flashing lights frighten most of the clients; but you could not tell it from their calm demeanors.

We were now in the lobby, and from every side doors opened and similar groups moved quickly toward the exits. From the Project PRIDE room, attendants were lifting and carrying the profoundly disabled from their room. Cary and I hurried outside with the others, and I found a spot on a bench while she went about her emergency duties. A passing attendant told me their goal from start to finish was three minutes once the alarm sounded; and they had easily bested the mark on this crisp December morning. The clients assembled comfortably into two large knots at each end of the





facility, exactly where they had been trained to go. There was a little grinning and chuckling, and some nervous laughter, but complete order. The precision of the drill, and absolute discipline by each individual, was a source of pride with them, you could tell.

When the alarm was finally quieted — burning popcorn had been the innocuous culprit — a small cheer went up, and the clients clapped happily. So did I.

This small vignette transpired just as I was beginning to write this book, but it came at an ideal time and provided a very valuable insight for me. I did not see helpless, long-suffering souls being herded out of a burning building. I saw capable, well-trained, disciplined men and women react to a normal emergency task with a level of intelligence and loving care that would put most “normal” members of our society to shame.

It was a lesson I would carry with me throughout the remainder of this rewarding project.

Opportunity Village invites both residents and non-residents to tour their campuses and see first-hand how one of the most unique not-for-profit organizations in the nation operates.

It is a very worthwhile thing to do.

