

Credibility through Visibility and Presence

~Kirk Hinkleman

The first time I saw Jacob, I should say heard Jacob, was an early morning about 3 years ago. Singing his song, at the top of his lungs, I could hear him coming from a block or two away. He has a distinctive look and energy. I didn't recognize him and thought to myself, this guy must be visiting family or something. Then the next day came, and the bellowing voice of this new figure in my neighborhood permeated my ears yet again. I looked up, and there he was again. All smiles, singing loud and proud, so everyone could hear. This encounter quickly became a pattern. Every morning, during the 7am hour, I'm hustling to get the kids out the door and into the car for school, and down the street saunters Jacob. I had not met him at this point, nor did I know his name. I found myself growing more and more connected to him, his energy, his disciplined walking practice, and his unabashed serenading of the neighborhood. Yet for some reason, I felt trapped in my head about introducing myself, given the work I do at Life Works and perhaps being shy...for Jacob, in our house, had reached rock-star status.

The months went along, I'd still just wave from my driveway. Jacob with a wicked smile, would always point back, never to break stride or song. People I do know in the neighborhood began asking me, via text, or in passing, how I knew Jacob and that it was so great that Life Works was "taking care of him". You see, this is what happens for folks like Jacob. People assume he's under some sort of supervision or control by the service system, and knowing who I am and what I do, the good citizens of Bayhopia (our nickname for our little corner of Clairemont/Bay Ho) just assumed I must know him.

"No," I would reply, "He's some awesome guy I've yet to meet, who clearly lives in this neighborhood now and blesses us with his presence daily." Jacob's credibility as a citizen living in this neighborhood is not predicated on identifying what agency supports him. His credibility as a citizen living in this neighborhood is defined by his consistent visibility and presence. He clearly lives here, as evidenced by the clockwork like interaction every person on his walking route has with him, each day in the 7am hour. Beyond these walks, as his story unfolds, his credibility comes in the forms of many Valued Social Roles.

Jacob moved to San Diego to live with his sister, Anna, after the passing of his mother. He had previously lived in Baltimore and the plan was always to relocate to live with Anna at this juncture of his life. Throughout Jacob's life, he would say "I'm going to live in California someday," this statement existing far before Anna would ever move her family to California. As the stars would have it, when his mother passed, Anna and her family lived in my neighborhood here in San Diego, California. This manifestation of his dreams is a theme for Jacob.

Finally, I got to formally meet Jacob when after an assessment by the San Diego Regional Center, he was referred to Life Works and myself, who also happens to be a neighbor. I'll confess, the first time I met Jacob, it was like meeting one of my heroes. He had entered my consciousness and resided in my mind and spirit for over a year. After several meetings figuring out what services to engage with, we decided to invite Jacob into the process of a Liberty Plan, a form of person-centered planning. What emerged from this process was a clear vision for Jacob and his life, co-created by him and what he and his family refer to as "the Sibs", a loving foursome of

brothers and sisters who have each other's backs, and that of Jacob's for sure. Jacob wanted to get a job. Jacob wanted to meet new people. Jacob wanted live on his own. Our job, as a team of allies and supporters, was to help Jacob realize his vision for his life, finding him valued social roles in his community, while supporting and continuing to cultivate the ones he made for himself.

Fast forward to now, while Jacob is still in search for a place to live, he has a team of folks around him, being led by his energy and his vision. He continues to meet new friends, building his community one person at a time. He no longer walks the same route every day in our neighborhood, as he is now employed at the local Ace Hardware, about a mile and a half from where he lives. So, on those days, he walks to and from work. Jacob has, in a small amount of time in San Diego, led his life with an open heart and a determined energy and is close to realizing fully, the vision he set for his life during his Liberty Plan.

The places he goes expect him to be there. He is valued at Ace Hardware. It is an ordinary place. Being employed is a Valued Social Role. He is valued at Practical Karate. It is an ordinary place. Being a student/practitioner of karate in a neighborhood dojo is a Valued Social Role. He is valued at his sister's home. He is a brother and an uncle. Being a brother and an uncle are Valued Social Roles. And for me, I expect to see him walking on his off days, on the sidewalks of our neighborhood, belting out his jam and kidnapping all our hearts, and engaging us in the beat of his. In a world of disconnection, even right next door, Jacob is a connector. Through his steps. Through his song. Through his presence. His viability as a citizen living in our neighborhood has nothing to do with Life Works. It has everything to do with how Jacob shows up...in his own life, and on behalf of ours.