

## **Did You Know? It Happens Here? Walking my path... Diversity, Inclusion, and Equality**

Shared by Penny Larson

(Penny Larson joined St. Mark's during the pandemic. She moved to Grand Rapids after retiring from a career in education in northern Michigan)

My first memory of being involved with diverse marginalized people occurred when I was about 20 years old. I remember being bused into inner cities and teaching children of color how to read. This process took several months, and it was most rewarding for me. It was the first time I went into an inner-city and saw life as it was - very different from my white privileged environment. This experience and Eleanor Roosevelt changed my life's trajectory. Even though Eleanor Roosevelt had passed before my experiences, I idolized her. I remember her words; I have read her books; I was very familiar with how she cared for diverse marginalized people. This attitude left a lasting impression on me.

Because of her, I have always been involved with those from marginalized populations. In my professional career, it should not be surprising that I found myself working and supporting people who were distressed. In the educational system, I became involved with kids who struggled in school. I worked with foster kids, students in detention centers, those in jail, and those who were at risk of failure in the educational system. Over time, I worked with countless troubled kids and became very familiar with their baggage. I remember hearing other teachers talking about how awful these kids were and how they didn't want them in their classrooms, but I did! The reason why I wanted them is that I was once one of them. My growing-up years were turbulent, and I readily understood the issues that these kids faced. I got them! I was able to relate and offered a voice in their defense.

Those who know me know that I'm not mainly a rule follower. I much prefer bending the rules if I cannot break them. Gray is my preferred color of vision, not black and white. I am mindful of whose measuring stick is used when evaluating others. It does make a difference. It has been my role to provide the voice for those who don't have a voice or think they don't have a voice.

I have worked on social justice issues for a long time and from diverse vantage points. One of my roles was that of a state president for an equality organization, and I even found myself "MC" ing a rally on the capitol steps for women's equality! Additionally, I have been a national co-chair for an organization that championed diversity and inclusion.

Taking my social justice drive a bit further, I am involved with the IAF (N.B., through St. Mark's Micah Ministry) in Grand Rapids. I am learning more about what I know instinctively, and that is to make a change, you need power, and that power comes from the people/organizations. Not the other way around. I have been lucky enough to have attended many of the IAF trainings, and I look forward to my increased role in this process. It is very exciting to work on systemic change – not just putting a band-aid on it.

Additionally, I am in the role of an autism ambassador for Southwest Michigan. This means that besides attending the local events and writing articles, I also develop public awareness and relationships with senators and representatives from Michigan to make policy changes for the benefit of those on the autism spectrum. On a personal note, I am the grandparent to a nonverbal autistic boy, and he means the world to me. So, of course, with my background and experience, I will fight and do the best I can for him and others like him.

As you can see, while I am relatively new here, I am getting my feet down. I believe that God has given me the skills and the experiences needed to benefit others. Even though I stumble (which I do), I am doing my best to walk the path that is before me. God is good.

Penny Larsen