

To the World You Are One Person, but to One Person You Are the World

Vicki Greenwood never expected she would be the volunteer leader of a large community organization like the Family Support and Resource Center (FSRC) in Brandon, Florida. Then again, this 37-year-old mother of two young girls, this year's elected President of the Brandon FSRC Family Community Advisory Council, never counted on opportunities fatefully landing in her lap. In fact, she grew up expecting life to be tough. All she knew she always had going for her was a determination to work harder than other people as well as a gift for making friends that came from an unshakable trust in the kindness of strangers. A trust she has earned over and over again since she was a child.

To hear Ms. Greenwood tell it, she knows about challenges. Born with a seizure disorder that took years to fully control, learning some basic mental concepts, especially in math and science, never came easily. Indeed, to this day, Ms. Greenwood has to come up with extremely creative, yet highly accurate ways of telling time, linking the hour to her routinely scheduled activities. As if like a heavy yoke on her back, Ms. Greenwood carried a label of global developmental disabilities as she wove her way from a special elementary school for children with learning disorders through a mainstreamed junior high school, and a learning disabilities program in a general academic high school in Tampa, where she graduated with an A-B average. Proud yet still unsatisfied, Ms. Greenwood entered Hillsborough Community College, earning an Associate Degree in Early Childhood Development. While working as a preschool teacher for 12 years, she continued her studies, and now needs one more class to complete the necessary coursework for a Bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts.

Ms. Greenwood also knows about the power of support. Her strong will to succeed in the face of challenges received encouragement from a number of key people. Her mother instilled in her the notion that while she may have an epileptic brain, she also was endowed with a great mind. Several high school teachers continued to reinforce Ms. Greenwood's natural ability, determination and perseverance. Today, her second husband reminds her as often as necessary that she is much better than she believes she is. Finally, the staff and fellow parents of the Brandon FSRC fuel her faith and reward her dedication to service. In her tireless efforts to improve the opportunities for all children and families in her community, Ms. Greenwood has discovered a most important truth – that a person's inherent dignity and potential contributions are shaped less by the limits of biology than by the spirit of tolerance, grace and love.

In sharing this story of an extraordinarily common individual, I also mark my admiration for people who create an organization so gifted in tapping the human potential of every citizen. For although Ms. Greenwood's first encounter with the Brandon FSRC occurred by accident, indeed a terrible accident, it was no accident at all that the staff and volunteers of the Center welcomed her family, helped heal their grief and insecurity and encouraged Ms. Greenwood's emergence as a community leader. Four years ago, before the Brandon FSRC even officially opened, Ms. Greenwood walked down the street from her home to attend a Back-to-School event at the Center. On their way home, then 6-year-old Kristin was hit by a car right around the corner from the Center. She sustained life-threatening injuries and was hospitalized for months. When word of the tragedy reached the Center, they sent gift baskets and teddy bears to mother and daughter. Even months after Kristin recovered (today she attends gifted classes), Ms. Greenwood avoided visiting the FSRC. Then one day, she needed assistance filling out paperwork for Medicaid and came to the Center. Danielle Soler, a Family Support specialist there, answered her call and has remained a "guardian angel" to Ms. Greenwood. Ms. Greenwood was hooked, her daughters and she are actively engaged in educational and recreational programs at the Center and the facility profits from the good will and good ideas that Ms. Greenwood contributes to the organization's growth and development. The Center's Manager, Ligia Vigo, meets with Ms. Greenwood before and after each month's Family Community Advisory Council meeting to plan the agenda and how to implement the actions recommended. By the way, Ms. Vigo began her own association with the FSRC as a parent consumer of services who offered to teach self-sufficiency classes and started a support group for Spanish-speaking mothers who were breastfeeding their infants.

I asked Ms. Greenwood what she likes most about the FSRC in Brandon. Her reply was decisive and long. The classes and services are all free to everybody. Strong professional partners in and dedicated to the community deliver programs with the Center staff and volunteers: the Child Abuse Council offers child development programs and screenings through its Baby Bungalow program; St. Joseph's Hospital Center for Child Advocacy holds health and safety classes; the Healthy

Start Coalition and Bright Beginnings provide administrative direction and the self-sufficiency program of adult education classes; the Children's Board of Hillsborough County funds the Center's operation; and other community-based organizations and individuals volunteer their expertise and assistance. Ms. Greenwood noted that the Center's doors are open every day except Sunday. Over 200 families currently use the Center's services and facility. Some come once in a while, others every day.

Ms. Greenwood suggested I remember two things above all: that no matter what your interest or need, you'll find someone at the Brandon FSRC who can help. And the Center offers a place to connect with others as well as a place to find your inner peace. My conversation concluded, I left the Center convinced that so long as communities like Brandon encourage the joint commitment of lay citizens and professional servants, children will grow to expect to be valued and to use their considerable abilities to raise the standard of civility that forms the basis of a healthy society.

Thank you, Ms. Greenwood. Thank you, Brandon FSRC.