



Jerry W. Friedman

Emerson once wrote that “nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” These words came to mind recently when I learned that Glenn Young was leaving federal service. Glenn’s official title was Learning Disabilities Specialist in the Office of Vocational Education for the U.S. Department of Education. Glenn is one among hundreds of federal officials responsible for a highly specialized program area within a vast system. They each, in their own way, contribute a piece to the larger puzzle that we call a human service network. They are the unsung heroes who often contribute without fanfare, advocate for their specific programs, and vie for their share of the diminished resource pie among competing priorities. These are difficult and sometimes thankless tasks deserving of far greater recognition and respect than they often gain from politicians, advocates, and the public at large.

I am always curious to learn why and how people choose a career in public human services. Often, their motivation is drawn from personal experience. Glenn Young’s journey into federal service was so unique, and his contribution so profound, that I want to share it with you.

Glenn’s fate appeared set at an early age when he was diagnosed with mild retardation and was relegated to the lowest class levels, starting in elementary school. Unfortunately, Glenn lacked a supportive family environment and his father died when he was young. Without a support system or the ability to read, Glenn’s adolescence was marked with truancy and antisocial behavior. He was bounced from one relative to another and his focus was more on survival than development. Although he gained very little from public schooling, he did manage to graduate from high school thanks to a policy of granting “social D’s” for attendance. Glenn’s motivation was not education, it was financial. As long as he was officially enrolled, he was able to draw Survivors Benefits due to the loss of his father.

After high school, Glenn drifted among odd jobs, including migrant farm work, and he experienced periods of homelessness. What set Glenn apart from other street people, however, was a strong sense of social justice and volunteerism. He became involved in social causes and was a fairly well-known local activist. This passion would serve Glenn well through-

out his life and career. At age 25, Glenn was married with a young child. He settled into the life of a day parent while his wife worked full time. In the evenings, he worked as a ball park vendor at the Kingdome in Seattle. Although he was climbing the ladder of social responsibility, he always knew that something was missing.

When Glenn’s daughter began to exhibit extraordinary academic potential, she was referred to a school for exceptional children. During the parent inter-

social maladies, especially welfare dependency. Glenn is quick to clarify that his mission is to help people accept personal responsibility by accommodating for a disability, rather than being exempt because of it. His contributions to the field are impressive. During his tenure, Glenn developed the first validated screening tool for learning disabilities, convened the first national meetings on welfare and disabilities, created pilot projects in several states, published numerous articles, and conducted over 300 training sessions.

The Amazing Journey of Glenn Young

view, Glenn related his own perilous journey through the education system. The school counselor suggested that Glenn exhibited some classic signs of LD (learning disabilities) the existence of which he was previously unaware. Upon the counselor’s suggestion, Glenn was tested and diagnosed with dyslexia. Glenn relates that on that day, at age 30, “I learned that my daughter is a genius, and I’m not an idiot.”

Glenn spent the next three years working with a private tutor to become college ready and, with support from Vocational Rehabilitation, he enrolled in the Seattle Community College. The rest of the story is amazing. With reasonable accommodation, Glenn received an AA degree in one year and a Bachelor’s degree the next year from the University of Washington with a 3.9 grade point average. He accomplished this as a single parent with full custody while maintaining his job as a vendor at the ball park. He then earned an MPA in 5 quarters (rather than 8) with high honors that culminated in a prestigious Presidential Management Internship with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that launched his period of federal employment.

Glenn’s own experience and personal passion marked a federal career dedicated to increasing the awareness of LD, developing tools and products, and establishing programs. He is a walking encyclopedia of statistics, anecdotes, and research that affirms that undiagnosed learning disabilities are a “hidden factor” in a number of

I first met Glenn in Washington State when he approached me about creating a pilot program that would randomly screen JOBS clients for LD. The findings were remarkable. Over one-third of the participants were identified as having previously undiagnosed learning disabilities. I later had the privilege of participating in a graduation ceremony in Wenatchee, Washington, for a class of LD clients who had accomplished their goals. Given reasonable accommodations, each had entered the workforce and was leading productive lives without welfare support. The joy, pride, gratitude, and sense of accomplishment at that event were inspiring. Little did they know that they owed that special moment in their lives to the extraordinary work of Glenn Young. I also believe that to the extent that learning disabilities are on the radar screen of public policy makers, Glenn deserves a lion’s share of the credit. It has truly been an amazing journey, and only confirms my belief that true heroes abound at all levels in human services. We should never cease to look for the very best in human potential. To Glenn Young, we, at APHSA, say, thank you for your outstanding contribution and we wish you continued success in the next leg of your amazing journey.