



The Faces of HMEA - April 2002

Pam Sweny began working as a Behavior Therapist in the Childrens Division in August 2001. She works with children in Early Intervention; her work with the children takes place in their homes.

Pam sees herself as “different” due to her hands. She has two fingers and a thumb on one hand and a thumb and finger on the other. She states that her earliest memories of being different are from when she was a young child and would hide her hands from others’ view.

“I wouldn’t raise my hand at school even if I knew the answer to a question” because she was afraid that the kids would make fun of her. She was careful to try and let people get to know her before she would use her hands in their presence.

“I believe that my mother felt a lot of guilt about my hands because she took medications during her pregnancy, which most likely was the cause. She never spoke about my hands and still doesn’t. She used to overcompensate by dressing me in very nice clothing and would have custom-made hand muffs made for me.” Pam’s father, on the other hand, encouraged her to follow her dream – “*you can be or do whatever you want to.*”

Pam has survived a lot and has become confident with herself. She has been ridiculed because her hands are different, she has endured discomfort, she remained in an abusive relationship because she felt inferior, her children have been ridiculed because of her, she felt isolated growing up in a world where she never saw anyone who was like her, and she worries about what the future might have in store for her. Yet, in spite of all that, Pam says that something “spiritual” moved her 15 years ago, and that led her to the conclusion that there was a purpose to her life based on her past experiences. With outside support, her self-confidence and courage grew, leading her to



get out of her abusive relationship, go back to work, and back to school for a degree in human services (she did this at the same time as she was raising three children herself). She had planned to become a counselor working with abused women, but decided instead to work with adults, and then children, with developmental disabilities.

As she began to work with kids on skill development, she thought that perhaps her hands might be a hindrance.

Teaching young children requires that the children imitate what the teacher is doing. “When I was teaching one boy to give a ‘high five’, I put up my hand and gestured for him to the same so we could slap each other’s hands. He, in turn, took the time to fold down three of his fingers so only two of his fingers were extended, and his hand would look like mine.” At a later date, someone who has hands with five fingers made the same gesture, and the child responded with all his fingers extended. That reassured Pam that her hands were not interfering with her teaching. It appears that she has, quite naturally, been teaching kids about “diversity”.

Pam’s message to others is: “*You shouldn’t be afraid to ask others about what you see in them that’s different from you. I wish that people would ask me about my hands rather than judge me. We need to embrace each other’s differences.*” Pam states that she has found a comfort zone at HMEA; people are very accepting. It is because of this comfort, and her personal experiences as being “different” that she volunteered to be a member of HMEA’s Diversity Committee. Diversity comes in many forms!

Jule Noack, Diversity Committee member, volunteered to conduct the interview for this edition of the Mann-U-Script.